In Varying States of Disgrace

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DAGON watches Tadiel worry his teeth over his bottom lip as he stares at the TV screen. His fine dark hair is mussed. Different from the way he usually wears it—carefully combed and charmingly old-fashioned. It's not that Tadiel doesn't eventually catch up; he just finds the pace of fashion these days to be overwhelming.

His frog-green eyes are wide and fixed on the young female newscaster. She's pretty, Dagon notes distantly, or at least she might be pretty underneath the pancake makeup and the dominating hair spray. She is doing an impressive job of keeping her cool as increasingly alarming news comes across her teleprompter.

"In other news, gang warfare in Chicago has reached unprecedented heights today, with this morning's riots spreading out as far as the immediate suburbs. The death count is steadily rising. City police are advising residents to barricade their windows and stay inside their homes. The mayor has declared a state of emergency, and the National Guard is expected to deploy before midnight tonight."

Dagon turns the volume up. It's hard to make out her voice over the rain lashing against the windows.

"Riots have also broken out in Knoxville, Dallas, Denver, and even Portland. And now we'll go to Steve with the weather. It sure is storming out there, Steve. What can you tell us?"

Dagon looks over at Tadiel again. His bottom lip has disappeared all the way into his mouth now. He leans toward Tadiel and tucks his hand underneath his knees, which, as the newscast has gone on, he has pulled up closer and closer to his chest.

Tadiel jumps at the touch, but shoots Dagon a grim smile and allows him to pull his legs into his lap. Dagon pets his lover's knees as the poor bewildered weatherman gapes at the angry red swirls whipping across his map.

“Uh. Yeah, Stace. We have… um, rain and lightning… like, everywhere. And uh… that’s been building all day… even though that’s not really… possible based on… you know. All the… atmospheric conditions.”

Tadiel lets out a shaky breath, eyes still locked on the screen. “This isn’t how I imagined it would happen,” he says. His voice is distant, quiet. Dagon’s not sure if he wants to wrap his arms around Tadiel or sink against Tadiel’s chest and be wrapped up himself.

In an abstract way, they’ve both always known this was coming. The reason he and Tadiel had been sent to Earth in the first place was to prepare for the apocalypse, but knowing it was the predicted outcome of the long game was one thing. Watching it beat across their windows is more terrifying than they had imagined it would be. And a lot has happened they never would have been able to imagine back when the Earth was young.

“Yeah,” Dagon agrees, letting his hand drift further up and down Tadiel’s leg. “I guess… I mean, I don’t think I really ever imagined it on TV. I thought more… you know. Prophets screaming in the streets.”

“There hasn’t been a prophet since 1758,” Tadiel replies absently. “They locked him up in an asylum. He kept prophesying until he died, but no one ever heard the Word.”

“Did your side get him or mine?” Dagon asks. The last part of his question is drowned out when thunder cracks so loudly the windows of Tadiel’s apartment rattle.

“He was left behind. He went into the Dark.”

Tadiel begins to chew his lip again, and Dagon nearly imitates him.

“They didn’t send an Angel to collect a prophet’s soul?” he asks. He hasn’t been an Angel, really, not for centuries upon centuries, but he’s barely been a Demon for the last few decades either, and the idea of a forgotten prophet, cursed to madness and then forsaken by God, disturbs him.

“Is it still prophecy if no one hears it but a stone wall?” Tadiel asks, his eyes already back on the screen. “He wasn’t useful. He didn’t help the cause.”

They’ve returned to Stacy the newscaster, still all white teeth and glassy eyes as she announces reports are coming in from California about a sudden and devastating E. coli outbreak.

“The Horsemen are up to full gallop,” Dagon comments, swirling a finger around Tadiel’s knee, rubbing his thumb into the little indentation under his kneecap.

“So it seems.” Tadiel leans back against the arm of his couch, not relaxing, just reclining, tucking his legs a little tighter to Dagon’s side. “When did Hell summon you?” he asks.

“This morning. Right after the rivers turned to blood. Heaven?”

“Not yet,” Tadiel replies.

“Maybe they’ve forgotten about you.”

Tadiel shakes his head.

The doorbell rings. Tadiel moves to get up but Dagon stops him, pressing his hand down on the fretting Angel’s thigh. Tadiel gives him another tight smile, and Dagon slides out from underneath him. The look on his face, a fragile façade of bravery covering logical and inevitable despair, hits Dagon hard. He leans across the couch to press a kiss to his lover’s wrinkled brow. He can’t say it will be all right, Demons can’t lie, but he wishes he could.

He crosses Tadiel’s small apartment in half a dozen steps, digging a wad of bills out of his back pocket before he opens the door. A girl, early twenties probably, but it’s harder to tell these days, is standing in the hall with a wan smile and huge bag of Chinese food. She and the bag are soaked through, and her teeth are chattering. Dagon smiles at her.

“Rough out there, huh?”

“Yeah,” she laughs. She sounds tired.

“Working in this all night?”

“Yeah, but I’ve got tomorrow off. Can’t complain. That’ll be $37.64.”

Dagon nods and hands her the whole wad of cash.

“Change?” she asks, flipping through the wad of rumpled bills, eyes widening as she realizes how much money he handed her. She holds it out in front of her as though it might bite.

“Keep it,” Dagon tells her. Her eyes pop.

“Sir—”

“Just do me a favor?”

She looks at him warily, taking a step back out into the hallway.

“Take the night off, all right? Call in sick and spend tonight with someone who loves you, and blow through all this money doing it. All right?”

“Are you okay, sir?” the delivery girl asks, still holding the money at arm’s length.

Dagon glances over at Tadiel, who’s pulling a bottle of wine out of the fridge.

“I will be if you take this money and take the night off. Please. I promise you won’t get in trouble.”

The girl gives him a hard look, peers around Tadiel’s plain and cheaply furnished apartment, and lets her gaze settle on Tadiel for a moment. Thunder cracks like the sky is breaking, and the skepticism in her eyes lessens.

“Okay. Thank you, sir.”

“Enjoy your night,” Dagon implores. She nods to him and starts down the hallway. He hears her greeting someone on her cell phone as he closes the door and smiles.

“You scared her,” Tadiel scolds, filling each of their glasses to the brim.

“Hopefully enough to convince her to go make the most of her last night on Earth.”

Dagon sets the dripping bag of Chinese food on the counter and tears the soggy paper bag off their containers of moo goo gai pan, fried rice, and cashew chicken. They’ve been dithering since the first signs manifested about what they would do in the last days, and once they decided they couldn’t fight the inevitable, they decided to just be together. They’d talked about going to Rome or Paris or a Caribbean beach or a lakeside retreat, but they had been everywhere, several times, since “everywhere” had begun, and this—mediocre Chinese food and good wine, being together in their cheap apartment until the generals of their respective armies noticed there were soldiers missing—was the night they’d decided on.

Plain.

Comforting.

Human.

Dagon wads up the shredded, wet mess that was once a brown paper bag and tosses it in the white plastic garbage can under the counter. When he looks up, he sees Tadiel reaching into the cupboard, pulling down the two fancy china plates he manifested years ago and hung onto.

Dagon watches the way Tadiel's arms arch gracefully over his head. He's always loved the way Tadiel moves. He's always deliberate and gliding and beautiful. The movement of his shoulder blades under his hunter-green long-sleeve shirt evokes a million memories of the way the light catches the patina of sweat on Tadiel's skin, making all his angles bright and all his movements sharp.

Dagon crosses the kitchen, sets his hands to the Angel's hips, and kisses his spine, right between his shoulders. Tadiel leans back against him, and Dagon lets his face slip up Tadiel's body, tucking his chin into the crook of Tadiel's neck and wrapping his arms around the Angel's stomach. He fights the urge to ask if Tadiel's okay. It's a stupid question.

"I can't believe this is what we've been waiting for," Tadiel finally sighs. "Centuries of gathering. *Millennia*. Just to blow the whole thing to pieces. And you know what, Dagon?"

"What, sweet?" The pet name appeared at some point during the Renaissance. Neither remembers how anymore.

"I'll bet anything we aren't the only ones who don't care anymore. I bet most of the lower hierarchies would rather just… give up on the stupid war and… and just stay here. With movies. And… Chinese food. *We're* the foot soldiers, Dagon. Those of us still on Earth and the collected souls. If who's going to win this pissing contest is so damn important to the higher orders, then why don't Lucifer and his Princes and God and the rest of the Archangels just whip out the measuring tape and have done with it?"

"I know." Dagon sighs. They've been having this discussion more often than usual lately, and it makes him angrier every time. It doesn't matter anymore. Tadiel is right. This isn't their war now. Hell will let forth its fury against Heaven and Heaven against Hell, and the Earth and everything either side has fought for or against in the planet's entire damn history will burn.

Tadiel rakes his hands over his face and tugs himself from Dagon's arms. He clears his throat and grabs a serving spoon out of a drawer. He scoops heaps of every container's contents onto their plates, then sets them

across from each other at the table, and drops into his seat. He takes a deep drink from his wineglass as he does and immediately fills it back up.

Dagon settles down across from him and picks up the chopsticks Tadiel's set out next to his plate. He looks at them for the first time in years. Dark wood, painted cherry blossoms.

Dagon feels a light pressure on the outsides of his feet as Tadiel sets his own feet against them.

The lights flicker in the apartment. Tadiel glances up as the clicking that accompanies the flicker beats up from an intermittent sound, like cat claws on the floor, to a blasting castanet clattering. The kitchen light goes out. The lamp in the living room pops with a tinkle of glass and a spray of sparks.

"I hope that poor Chinese food girl hurries," Dagon comments. Tadiel makes a small noise of agreement and manifests lit candles all over the living room. After a moment, he creates a few on the table as well. Dagon reaches through a gap between two of them and covers the Angel's hand with his own. Tadiel turns his hand to meet Dagon's palm and twines their fingers, stroking his thumb along the outside of Dagon's

There's a knock at the door. They both glance over. The only things they are expecting tonight wouldn't knock. Tadiel's fingers tighten around Dagon's hand.

"Come in!" Tadiel yells.

The door swings open and they hear a bright, familiar, "Hi, boys!"

The clench of Tadiel's fingers around Dagon's loosens. "Good evening, Mrs. Connor," he says, covering up his seriousness with sudden polite charm for their elderly neighbor.

"Oh." She places a heavily ringed hand to her chest. "Now it looks like I'm interrupting a romantic night. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it, Mrs. Connor. How can we help you?" Dagon asks.

"Well, it's this storm. All my lights are out, and I can't find a flashlight or a candle to save my life. Could you boys give me a hand?"

"Of course." Tadiel gets up and goes to a cupboard Dagon knows is usually empty. He pulls out a heavy-duty flashlight and a handful of candles he must have magicked into existence. The scent of sandalwood, which

Mrs. Connor's apartment absolutely reeks of, tickles at Dagon's nose as Tadiel walks past him.

"Thank you so much, Todd," Mrs. Connor says as Tadiel hands over the candles and flashlight. "I've said it before and I'll say it again—I'm so glad you boys moved in here. It's so nice to have good neighbors in this building again. And don't think I've forgotten about you bringing me groceries last week, either. I'll have cherry pie brought over just as soon as my sister's trees turn."

"We're happy to help." Tadiel leans down so his long, lanky frame is arched over Mrs. Connor's petite one. He presses a kiss to her temple along the edge of her fading red hairline, and a flash of blue light suffuses the apartment for a nearly imperceptible second.

Mrs. Connor gasps, then clears her throat. "Yes… well. You boys ever need anything, you just… come knock. Thanks again, Todd. Dagon."

"Have a good night, Mrs. Connor," Dagon says over another cannon-shot of thunder.

"Are you boys ever going to call me Mary-Anne?"

Tadiel smiles at her sadly. "We never have before, Mrs. Connor." He holds the door open for her as she wobbles out.

"What did you do?" Dagon asks when he settles back down across the table.

"Her soul is marked for heaven now." Tadiel returns to his seat.

"I thought only Demons could mark a living soul's destination."

"Moment of divine ecstasy." Tadiel shrugs. "She's a living saint. For now."

"Is that allowed?"

"Not really. It's one of those loopholes that gets you into real trouble, but…." He shrugs again, pushing his cashew chicken back and forth across his plate.

"Right." Dagon drinks from his wineglass and clears his throat. "Maybe I should go tempt her. Offer to restore her youth. Give her a great last night. I think she'd have more fun in Hell."

"But she'll be good for Heaven." Tadiel taps his chopsticks against his plate, once, twice, then drops them into his rice. He crosses his arms and

leans back in his chair. “Maybe that was a mistake. Maybe I should have left her soul unclaimed. Let it go out into the Dark to be sorted out later.”

Dagon takes his hand again. “You’re not all knowing. You’ve done the best you could.”

“One last good intention before the end,” Tadiel replies.

It hurts Dagon to see him like this. Tadiel deserves better. He has *tried* like no one else has. He has believed, and he has truly worked for good, even when his idea of good was not what had been agreed on. He wasn’t important enough to have ever been titled, and both of them had been demoted plenty of times. If Dagon had been asked to name him, or assign him, or place him, or whatever they had been doing in Heaven since his Fall, he would have called Tadiel the Angel of Compassion. Ever since he’d gone down to keep Abraham from killing Isaac, Tadiel had been one of the few to see humans, whom Angels had once been asked to bow to, as more than chess pieces, or more accurately Monopoly money, in the Great War.

Dagon wasn’t sure what he’d done to deserve Tadiel.

“I’m sorry,” Tadiel huffs, pushing his plate a few inches away. “I just don’t think I’m actually hungry.”

Dagon gets up, circles the table, and bends to kiss Tadiel’s forehead. There’s no flash of light. No crash of thunder. No burst of heat. No suffusion of comfort. Only a sinking in his heart. They’ve loved each other literally forever—and tonight it ends.

“Me either,” Dagon breathes. Tadiel tilts his head, pressing his temple back into Dagon’s lips. His soft smell, like papyrus and lilies, and underneath, not quite hidden, like iron, fills Dagon’s nose.

The Angel turns in his chair and snakes his broad hand up Dagon’s neck, sweeping him down into a kiss like breathing: just as natural, just as easy.

Love is an Angelic drive, which, even with Dagon as far Fallen as he is, they both share. But attraction and desire are things they’ve learned. Held close. Cherished more than their homes or demanded allegiances.

Tadiel’s fingers spear into Dagon’s hair, pulling him closer. Dagon sets his palms against his lover’s shoulders, runs his hands down Tadiel’s firm chest, then slips them under his arms and draws him up out of the chair and against his chest, where he settles with a shattered sigh.

“What if I’m called?” he whispers against Dagon’s lips. “What if they know what we’re going to do?”

“Shh… if you’re called, we’ll have it done before anyone’s sent for you.”

“Yes.”

“It’s going to be all right.”

“No. It’s going to be enough.”

Dagon runs his palms over the hard lines of the Angel’s shoulder blades. Tadiel lets out a wordless murmur and surges forward, his kiss pouring into Dagon. He fights the urge to take a step back under the sudden onslaught.

“Come on,” Tadiel demands, voice deeper than usual, hands grasping so tight at Dagon’s shoulders that it almost hurts. “Come on. I need you again.”

“Yes.” Dagon gulps as Tadiel dives back into the kiss. He chastises himself halfheartedly. He hates seeing Tadiel upset, doubting, but it has been decades since he’s seen Tadiel as desperate as he is today. Dagon’s dropped Tadiel to the mattress over and over again and he must be sore, but whispers like “I need you” make Dagon feel like there are things he can take back, undo. Something as bright and glorious as Tadiel needs comfort from something like him, and it makes his kiss feel like salvation.

He steps forward and presses his chest to Tadiel’s, moves them back toward their bedroom as Tadiel tries to bury himself further into the kiss. Their teeth knock together. A disappointed noise wrings out of Tadiel, like he’d been looking forward to that particular kiss and it had been pulled away from him.

“Shhh,” Dagon soothes. He takes another step forward. This time Tadiel mirrors, like they’re dancing.

“Dagon,” Tadiel insists.

“Yes?”

Tadiel grunts, the same frustrated grunt he resentfully gives anything more technologically advanced than his DVD player, and thrusts his thumbs underneath the hem of Dagon’s shirt. Fisting the fabric, he rips the front open. Buttons go flying. The sound of them hitting the walls and the floor is lost under the sound of the rain. Dagon moans into Tadiel’s mouth, hardens

against his jeans. He pushes forward fast and knocks Tadiel back against the wall. Tadiel makes a noise between a growl and a gasp, letting his legs fall open so Dagon can grind against him. His mouth drops to the juncture between Dagon's neck and shoulder, sucking kisses against his skin with the perfect degree of intensity.

The Angel's thigh is starting to edge up around his hip. Dagon seizes it under the knee and hauls Tadiel up against the wall. Tadiel whines a little in disappointment when his lips are pulled away from Dagon's skin, but the whine turns to a pant as Dagon presses his hips to Tadiel's, pinning him more securely to the wall. Rocking up slowly, he rolls the lengths of their cocks together. Dagon clasps a hand to the back of Tadiel's head and pushes him down into a kiss, preening as the second slow roll of his hips gets a strangled "Oh, oh!" out of the Angel.

Tadiel brings his hands back to cup Dagon's face and thrusts his tongue into the kiss, licking into Dagon's mouth, tickling against his tongue and the sensitive roof. Dagon pulls back from the kiss, gulping in air.

The blare of sirens rings out against the ever-more-frequent thunder, and another flash of lightning, sunlight-bright, carves into the room, setting the hungry look on Tadiel's face in sharp relief before their lips meet again. Dagon drops his hands back down Tadiel's body, scoops them under his ass, and lifts. They spin away from the wall.

Tadiel gasps sharply and tightens his grip on Dagon's body. Anchoring himself around Dagon's neck, he squeezes his legs around Dagon's hips, engulfing him. The kiss is completely undistracted by Dagon using Tadiel's back to bash the half-closed bedroom door open. A few wide, practiced strides take both of them to Tadiel's bed. Dagon drops Tadiel down onto his pale-blue comforter and Tadiel paws at Dagon's back, trying to pull him closer.

The insistent grip of Tadiel's long fingers is difficult to break. The urge to simply drop down onto Tadiel and rut together is hard to ignore, but Dagon pulls himself away and hurriedly seeks the hem of Tadiel's shirt, then slips his fingers underneath with a panted "Tadiel." Tadiel finally loosens his hold and lets Dagon tug his shirt up.

The neck of the shirt catches against Tadiel's nose. He snorts and mutters, "Easiest clothes you've ever pulled me out of and *this*? Demons are supposed to be practiced in the sins of the flesh, you know."

“Hush,” Dagon scoffs. “You love me.”

“I do,” Tadiel whispers sincerely as Dagon finishes pulling the shirt over his head. Tadiel sets his hands to Dagon’s shoulders and works him out of the rags of his own shirt. “More than anything.” His soft hands glide up Dagon’s arms and cup the Demon’s face. “Dagon? More than anything. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, sweet. I know.”

“Dagon—”

“Yes.”

“More than God, Dagon. I mean it.”

A cold chill spikes up Dagon’s spine. It’s finally hitting him how serious this is. What they’re really about to do and what it will really mean. He licks his lips and tries to think of any response worthy of Tadiel’s admission, then presses forward into the kiss. Tadiel’s arms wrap around him, and Dagon feels a shiver of something like guilt settle over his skin.

Tadiel still has a chance. Dagon thinks Heaven is going to win. Tadiel has failed, worked around orders, convinced the powers-that-be to have mercy, and run a decently hidden scam for the last forty years, but never outright rebelled. He could go back to Heaven shouting “Devil made me do it” and survive. It’s possible.

But, Dagon reminds himself, the wrath of Heaven is every bit as fierce as the wrath of Hell. They made their choice centuries ago, and there is no going back now.

Tadiel wraps his arms around Dagon’s shoulders and drags Dagon inexorably down onto his body. Dagon’s only instinct when he feels Tadiel’s cock hard against him is to rock down. Touch more. Kiss harder. Has been, every time, even the first time, washing blood off Tadiel’s body, so surprised when that body responded.

He sets his teeth to the skin under Tadiel’s ear, which wrings the familiar bucking and whimpering out of him. *And, oh, the things I’ve learned about this body since then.*

Tadiel’s palms glide down his back, over his hips, and under his jeans. He grabs Dagon’s ass through his boxers before sliding back up his body and under the fabric. Dagon sucks harder at the spot on Tadiel’s neck as

Tadiel grips tight handfuls of flesh, forces Dagon's hips down into his own, and moans again as he grinds back up.

Dagon rocks into the sensation before fumbling a hand between them. His fingers find the button on Tadiel's jeans and twist. He's never sure if he misses or is relieved to be rid of doublets and breeches and smallclothes and their interminable laces and buttons and frogs. They added an element of anticipation, and Tadiel had been beautiful in them, but he was as beautiful out of them, and the instant gratification of the zipper is hard to deny.

Tadiel takes the hint, loosens his grip, and lets Dagon step back. He unzips his jeans and shuffles Tadiel out of them before shucking his own. Tadiel repositions, scoots up the bed, and falls back onto the pillows as he squirms out of his boxers. Dagon drops down onto his knees beside him and falls into his kiss as he shifts over to straddle Tadiel's ivory body.

Tadiel's hands at his back are hot like embers, burning up his skin as they travel from his ass to his shoulders, then pull their bodies flush again. Dagon grinds down, hard, and their cocks rub together. He revels in the velvet slide of Tadiel against him. Tadiel's head rocks back with a moan. The column of his throat calls to Dagon, begging to be licked and kissed. Nibbled and sucked. He sets his lips against Tadiel's skin, gulping his scent down desperately as Tadiel crushes their bodies together, then arches up into Dagon like he can't squirm close enough, can't hold tight enough.

Dagon wants to draw this out. He loves nothing better than spending hours in bed with Tadiel, trying to touch and kiss all of him. Sometimes it seems they spent half the French Revolution pressing their come-slicked bellies together, and now, with the fear they may be ripped apart heavy in the air, he wants to press as close as they can, hold as tight as they can for as long as they can.

Tadiel's hands dig into his back, around his shoulder blades, cupping the scapula. "Dagon?" he pants.

"Mmhmm?"

He clenches at the blades of Dagon's shoulders again, fingers settling into the hollows underneath them. "Can we… one last time?"

Dagon kisses him. "Yes."

Tadiel's arms fall away from his back, outward onto the bed. Dagon sweeps a hand over his cheek, thumbing along the light touch of stubble,

waiting for Tadiel's green eyes to settle on his face, then he lets his wings manifest, tucked close to his back.

Tadiel's hands come up off the bed, and Dagon shivers as they trace gently across the tip of his wing.

"Let me see," Tadiel murmurs.

Tadiel knows his body as well as he knows Tadiel's, but Dagon still shivers when Tadiel touches his wings and feels what they've become. Black and leathery. Their surface is scaled, and they feel like charred wood to the touch. They were burnt when he was hurled from Heaven, and they've mutated since then, no longer birdlike Angel wings. He spreads them out slowly, until he feels the tips brush against the bedroom walls. Tadiel reaches up and sweeps his palm down the planes of skin between the bones, and Dagon gasps and grinds down into him with a swallowed moan.

It's not even the sensation so much as the acknowledgment. He knows Tadiel still feels guilt that he was the one to throw Dagon into the Pit. He himself still feels shame at what happened between them before his Fall, but only Tadiel has ever touched him like this. Since the beginning of time.

He pulls his wings back in, letting them arch down so Tadiel's hands can sweep over them, down the backs of them, so Tadiel can slide his fingers down the joint where they meld into his back.

"Yours," Dagon whispers.

Tadiel shifts underneath him, adjusts the position of his shoulders on the bed, and then, with a small smile, they appear, spread so wide each primary feather arcs out of the wingspan and so white they're visible in the dark. He arcs them up over Dagon's and, after the space of a breath, touches them together. Dagon moans again as the soft feathers brush over his own defiled skin.

"Dagon?"

"Ye… uhhh… uhh… yeah?" Dagon responds as Tadiel starts arching up into him, rubs their tumescent cocks against each other, and starts a rhythm that echoes through his wings against Dagon's.

"After we… afterward… afterward, will you make love to me again?"

"Anything for you."

“Dagon, you shouldn’t be talking like this,” Tadiel hisses to him as they walk through the Garden, meandering along the same path they always take. “It’s not right.”

“And Lucifer being cast out *was* right?”

“He rebelled,” Tadiel replies simply.

Dagon doesn’t really understand the feeling Tadiel’s refusal to listen causes in him. It’s hot and uncomfortable and makes his heart beat too fast. It’s new and interesting, like so many things have been since Lucifer was cast out and things changed in Heaven. But he doesn’t like this feeling. Or the way Tadiel is looking at him.

“He spoke,” Dagon argues. “He thought. Is exile really an appropriate punishment?”

“He was told to bow and he did not,” Tadiel counters. “This is black and white. There is no gray here. We are made to praise, obey, and love God.”

The uncomfortable hot feeling in Dagon’s chest burns a little hotter. “We know Lucifer. He loves God. God asked him to love the new humans more, and Lucifer is punished because he could not? Tadiel—it makes no sense. To be punished for love? Would I cast you from me if you would not love another Angel more than you love me?”

They round a corner and head through the high trees.

“That doesn’t compare. You and I love each other as Angels love each other. We love God as Angels love God, and now we love humans as God has commanded. Lucifer thought himself too mighty to love as he was commanded and too mighty to serve creation as God instructed.”

“What if love can’t be commanded?”

“Disobedience is not symptomatic of love. You know this,” Tadiel says as the shadows of the trees fall over them and the path grows cool under their feet.

“But I don’t understand it. The humans have already disobeyed. Lilith has spit in the Garden of Eden. Can we love them if they are imperfect?”

Tadiel is silent for several steps before finally, quietly, he replies, “It scares me that you question our Father. After what has happened.”

The feeling of peace Dagon has always known is suddenly gone completely, like smoke carried off in the wind. Even with the way that feeling has been changing lately, to have it disappear altogether is disconcerting. Tadiel telling him he is scared did that.

Dagon reaches out for his hand.

“I don’t want to scare you.” Dagon squeezes his friend’s hand, as though concerned Tadiel would pull away from him. “But Lucifer’s Fall scares me. God’s reaction has scared me, and I am uncertain.”

Dagon’s heart skitters when Tadiel *does* pull his hand away and sets it to his chest, as though to keep Dagon from trying to grab it again.

“Dagon!”

His voice is loud and sharp and strange. An Angel ahead of them, Jophiel, looks back with narrowed eyes before continuing along the path.

Dagon looks down at his hand, then at Tadiel’s. His wings sink farther down his body.

“Dagon,” Tadiel says, more gently this time. His hand is still at his chest. “Please do not say these things. I do not want to see you cast out as well.”

“But I must wonder if Lucifer was right,” Dagon insists. They pass by the bramble of sweet-smelling wildflowers by which Tadiel usually likes to linger. “I must wonder if expulsion is fair. I do not want you angry with me.”

Tadiel looks over and takes Dagon’s hand back in his own. Dagon looks up for the first time since he's mentioned Lucifer.

“I am only angry with Lucifer,” Tadiel says quietly.

“For disobedience?” Dagon asks quietly.

“For changing everything. As we walked together before Lucifer’s exile, things were simple. We were happy. All the Angels of heaven are troubled now. He has caused this.”

Dagon opens his mouth to speak, but, for some reason, decides not to tell Tadiel what he thinks. It makes him uncomfortable, and he doesn’t really understand why. Instead of the challenge he wants to put forth, that perhaps God and the humans had caused the trouble in paradise, Dagon says, “Yes. You are right. We won’t speak of this anymore. I do not want to trouble you.”

DAGON had not thought it would come to this. He had not expected Lucifer's stubbornness. His zealotry.

He had not expected a war in Heaven, pitting Angel against Angel.

Blood streaks the grass in the Garden. An Angel, armor gleaming in the sunlight, lies dead and broken in a bed of flowers.

A sword clangs against Dagon's breastplate, knocking him backward. He doesn't manage to catch himself and collapses onto his back, stabs upward blindly, and feels his blade hit flesh.

The body above him sinks down his blade, shudders and gasps. The sight had been horrifying when the battle had begun, but after the first day of bloodshed, Dagon found himself growing accustomed to the cries of death.

"Dag…," a voice above him croaks. Mathlai's face is only a few inches above his own, his confused expression already softening into the blankness of death.

Dagon had known Mathlai.

Talked with him.

Killed him.

Bitterness blooms in his chest. He has served God! All the so-called Renegade Angels have served God. They have loved God. And there has been no love returned. There has been no forgiveness. One challenge since the beginning of eternity, and they have been barred from Heaven.

Something stronger than anger twists painfully in Dagon's stomach and burns inside him. He heaves Mathlai's dead body off his sword and brings himself back to standing. He parries a slash toward his throat, throwing another old friend, Bazriel, toward the waiting sword of a member of his own battalion. He hears the cry and wet slicing noise as his eyes lock onto the face of the Angel in front of him.

Tadiel.

His eyes are glowing like light behind leaves, even brighter against the furious red of his cheeks.

They stand facing each other, swords ready. Neither strikes. Tadiel's eyes fall to Dagon's bloody sword. He cries out and charges like one of the

beasts of the Earth. Dagon brings his sword up in defense as Tadiel's blade swings down.

"What have you done?" Tadiel demands, his voice almost lost among the cacophony of crashing blades and grinding shields.

Dagon blocks his blade and throws it off with his own.

"What have you all done? Why didn't you just obey, Dagon?"

Tadiel's wrath is terrifying. His sword comes down again as he screams, "Is this better than bowing?" Tadiel's next strike knocks Dagon a step backward. When Tadiel follows, striking again, they're brought deeper into the fray. "Is this what you wanted?" Tadiel cries again. He sounds like his throat is tearing.

"I didn't start this war, your side did!" Dagon manages to scream back. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees the flash of a sword flying toward Tadiel.

Without thinking, Dagon juts his arm out and strikes the blade away from its clear path into Tadiel's body. Tadiel launches his blade into the neck of the rebellious Angel, with a roar that makes Dagon shudder. A noise like that has no place in Tadiel's throat. And almost as though he knows it, tears glimmer on Tadiel's cheeks.

His blade twangs as it catches in the renegade Angel's backplate. When he tries to wrench it out, he comes back empty handed, vulnerable. He glares at Dagon.

"Go ahead! Follow your new Master's orders! Kill me!"

"Tadi—" Dagon starts. He can't do it. Can't watch the light go out of Tadiel's eyes, even with Tadiel screaming angry blame at him.

Before he can finish saying his friend's name, Tadiel is on him, forcing him down onto the blood-slicked grass of the battlefield.

His bare hands scrabble against Dagon's armor. Dagon is overwhelmed by Tadiel's fury, unable to do anything but try to hold the enraged Angel back, his sword, still in his hand, hanging useless beside him.

"I told you!" Tadiel manages, throwing Dagon's barely resisting shoulders back to the ground. "To have faith! Not to abandon me for Lucifer!"

Dagon finally finds his voice. Unfortunately, what he uses it to say is, “I asked you to come with!”

The rage in Tadiel’s face goes from red to white. His mindless attack gains purpose. His hands dig underneath Dagon, and Dagon’s attempt to hold him off is futile.

“I never would! I know who I serve!” Tadiel screams. He gets his hands underneath Dagon and grabs at the joints of his wings. Dagon struggles against him, but it’s too late. Tadiel, practically snarling, digs his hands into the joints, grips tight, and hurls Dagon down from Heaven.

TADIEL has been watching the blind weaver for the last few hours, following him invisibly. He is fascinated by the way the man moves, measured steps as though keeping count as he travels through the village with his clouded eyes open and his chin held high.

He is on his way back home from buying wool. In a few moments, he is going to be run over by a cart and killed, and Tadiel is going to take his soul for Heaven.

The weaver comes to a crossroads. He turns his head, as though his milky eyes could tell him what is coming from either direction. He doesn’t see the ass down the street get spooked by a stray chicken. He steps into the road, and Tadiel steps behind him.

Then a man appears at his side. Out of nothing.

“Some help today, Grandfather?”

Tadiel freezes. He knows that voice.

Dagon.

He has orders. He is to smite any Demon he comes across. But he can’t harm a faithful man, and Dagon is too close.

Dagon extends his arm, and the man takes it in time to be pulled back, out of the path of the rampant ass barreling past.

Dagon must be shielding his true form from passersby as he walks the weaver down the road, Tadiel realizes. No one in the street is turning to look at the blind man being led along by a man with pale skin, hay-blond hair, and dressed in rich black robes.

Tadiel follows them back to the man's home and ducks in after them, then crosses the dirt floor and tucks himself into a corner across from Dagon.

He has changed. He is leaner. The angles of his face are sharper. His brown eyes seem larger. Darker.

The weaver indicates a space on a floor mat. Dagon settles down onto it regally. Relaxed now, he lets his wings manifest.

Tadiel gasps.

They are blackened and burnt. Charred feathers crumble at the edges. The black of them is shabby and dead looking, particularly against the fine linen of his robe.

With effort, Tadiel pulls his eyes away from them and settles his gaze back onto the weaver. He walks around his own home less carefully than he walks in the street, but he seems no more at ease.

His home is small. There is a half-completed blanket on the loom, but while it seems as though the man has been able to continue working at his trade, there are still hints of poverty. His worn clothes. The smell of slightly old, though not yet rotten, meat. The chipped cup he offers to Dagon.

The man remains standing while Dagon takes a deep drink, then smacks his lips appreciatively and perhaps a little too loudly.

Tadiel feels a small spark of curiosity. Angels don't drink or eat. Dagon—the Demon's—aura of temptation must be suffusing the small, dusty room.

The weaver smacks his own lips, as though his mouth is suddenly dry, confirming Tadiel's suspicion.

"Thank you for your kindness today, son," the weaver says.

"Of course," Dagon replies politely. His appearance may be slightly altered, but his voice hasn't changed at all. Though it is strange to hear him speaking Aramaic.

"But that's not all I have to offer you, Ahzi."

"Why would you offer me anything more?" the weaver asks jovially.

"The question is not *why* I would offer, but *what* I can offer."

The weaver's smile goes a little rigid, and he steps back. Tadiel relaxes. A faithful man is not so easily taken from Heaven.

"*What* can you offer me, son?"

A smirk twists Dagon's familiar features. Tadiel shivers, and Dagon's dark eyes flick to the corner where Tadiel stands, as though he senses the movement. A Demon shouldn't be able to perceive him when he's hidden himself, but Tadiel stills as a precaution.

Dagon sets his cup down and stands. "I can return your sight to you."

"What?" the weaver whispers.

"You heard me, Ahzi. I can make you see again."

"Are you…," the weaver starts, but stumbles over the words before trying again. "Are you a messenger of God?"

"No," Dagon answers simply.

"A temptation of Satan then?"

"Yes. And here is my temptation. Your sight for your soul."

"No," the weaver answers immediately.

Tadiel tries to do something. Send out strength to the man, keep him strong in his faith and conviction. But there is a limit to what he can do. A man must choose good on his own.

"Allow me to clarify my offer. I will return your sight to you. You can provide for your wife and your children."

"No."

"And you'll need the money when your son gets sick."

"I don't believe you."

"Demons cannot lie." Dagon's voice is sticky with good nature. "He won't be very sick. A few herbs from a healer's hands will be enough to cure him."

"I wouldn't take a witch's magic. I would not turn away."

"You will," Dagon informs him. "You will do this to save your son. But you will not be able to afford the witch's cure, and your son will die. Of course, if you could work as you have before, you won't descend into poverty, and he won't become ill. This is your last chance. Three denials and I must leave." Dagon pauses. "Your sight. Or your soul."

The weaver stands still, his clouded eyes somehow locked on Dagon's.

"My wife and children, their souls will be safe?"

“If they don’t succumb to temptation in the future.” Dagon’s smile shows teeth this time.

The weaver gulps. Tadiel hopes for the best. This is a good man, a man who would be in Heaven even now if it weren’t for Hell’s meddling.

The weaver turns his blank eyes to the corner where his loom sits.

“This will save my son.”

“And return the sight which God allowed to be taken from you.”

Tadiel fumes. It isn’t as though God personally plucked the eyes from the man’s head, and he would have been rewarded in Heaven.

“Then yes,” the weaver says. His voice is quiet and rough.

“Let’s shake on it.” Dagon raises his hand, the weaver extends his own, and Dagon clasps it, shaking them firmly. Thunder rolls and the weaver cries out, then cries out again and jumps backward, away from Dagon.

“Good as new?” Dagon asks.

The weaver nods, wide, suddenly clear eyes dragging in shock over Dagon’s blond hair and black wings. Dagon drops his hand.

“Look around, Ahzi,” Dagon crows, throwing his arms wide. “Go see the trees and the sunlight. Your sight has returned.” Dagon claps his hand down on the weaver’s shoulder. The man flinches. “It’s a miracle.”

Dagon spins on his heel and struts out of the hut. Tadiel storms after him. They’re only a few steps into the street before Dagon turns to face him.

“Enjoy the show, Tadiel?”

Tadiel gapes at him.

“I’m still an Angel, old friend. Remember? You can’t hide yourself from me.”

“You snatched his soul, Dagon.”

Dagon rolls his eyes. “He exchanged it in a fair trade. His wife, his son, his livelihood. He’ll live a long and prosperous life. He’ll live to see his grandchildren.”

“And then he will spend an eternity in Hell!”

Dagon shrugs. “You’ve never been to Hell. How would you know eternity down there would be so bad?”

“By seeing what you’ve become,” Tadiel retorts.

“A generous man out helping pillars of the community,” Dagon supplies, spreading his arms out magnanimously.

“You look monstrous,” Tadiel snarls.

Dagon pauses, takes a step closer to him, and flicks his wings out for inspection. “Hell didn’t do this to me. You did. You threw me down from Heaven, and I burned as I fell. I refused to hurt you, who I loved above all others, and you maimed me in the name of a God who wanted to let that poor weaver die. And you know what would have happened to his family. His wife’s degradation. His son’s death.”

“Today’s deed is not the only one you have done,” Tadiel retorts. “You have done evil, Dagon.”

Dagon nods. “I have. And I’ve chosen it. And I’ve enjoyed it, Tadiel.” He steps even closer. Tadiel refuses to back away. Dagon is so close he can feel Tadiel's breath on his cheeks. “You’ve thought about it. Doing what you want.”

“You cannot tempt me, Dagon. I am an Angel.”

“I’ve already tempted you.”

“I stood—”

“I’ve already tempted you, Tadiel,” Dagon repeats, his lips wrapping around each individual word.

“How?” Tadiel demands.

“Your orders are to smite me on sight, and I am still here.” Dagon quirks his head to the side, then smiles broadly. “I will see you again, Angel.”

He disappears with a burst of black smoke, which whips away in the wind.

Tadiel throws his head back and screams.

DAGON trundles through the wreckage of the broken pillars, stepping over shattered bodies as he goes, until he comes to the one he is seeking. The corpse lies on its side, the rubble around it propping up a pair of broad shoulders and bulky arms. Ragged, uneven hair hangs a little way down its pallid face, just far enough to fall into the scarred and empty eye sockets.

Dagon turns away and kicks a chunk of marble with a growl. It hits the one unbroken lamp left in what had still been a temple a few hours ago. The flaming oil rains quietly down over a pile of rocks, burning onward.

Of all people, Dagon should know pride goes before a fall, but he had been so *sure* he could claim Samson's soul for Hell. The man was a lecher with the temper of a child. His soul should have been as good as damned.

Dagon kicks another broken piece of pillar.

"My sentiments exactly," a voice sighs behind him.

Dagon doesn't bother turning around. "Well, Tadiel, you'll be happy to hear you've at least thwarted my plans. Taking the soul of one of God's heroes? That would have gained me the favor of Lucifer. I have failed now."

"And the hero of God, who would have saved many people and led an army in Heaven, dies with an unclaimable soul. I face punishment too."

There is a crunching of light steps on rolling rock behind him. Tadiel stands at his side. "And there is still this one Fallen Angel who keeps upsetting people because I have not been able to kill him."

"Right." Dagon nods. "Him. What's stopping you?"

"I do not know," Tadiel replies morosely.

The burning oil snaps and pops in the heavy silence of the ruins.

"I thought this would be easy," Dagon says finally.

"And me," Tadiel agrees.

"Where do you suspect we made our mistakes?"

"It may have been you tempting him with the woman," Tadiel suggests.

Dagon shakes his head. "That wasn't my doing."

"It wasn't?"

“No. I made him proud of his strength, and I inspired the Philistines to pay her to question him. Eleven hundred pieces of silver? No whore overlooks that.”

The light of the burning oil begins to dim. The slow flicker gives the impression the body at their feet is moving slightly. Maybe even breathing.

“What about you?” Dagon asks. “Where did your fatal flaw lie?”

“Samson?”

A thin, high voice, like an instrument being played despite its fraying strings, cuts into their discussion. Dagon and Tadiel exchange a look and fade themselves out of human perception as Delilah carefully picks her way through the mess.

“Samson?” she calls again. She’s thin, bony rather than slender, but pretty in spite of it. Her clothes are rich, her hair well oiled. A few chains of gold hang around her neck, glittering at the point where they pour over her small breasts.

She slips on the broken stones, almost falls but catches herself. She looks up before she stands and finds herself at eye level with the body of the man she seeks.

She lets out a strangled cry, rushing over, stumbling in the rocks twice before finally falling in front of Samson’s corpse.

“Samson?” she asks again, voice quiet, rustling like sand being blown against a wall. She reaches out to him, touches his skin, and recoils. He must be cold, Dagon thinks. He’s been lying dead for hours.

Dagon looks over at Tadiel, who looks paler than usual, eyes wide. Delilah chokes back a sob, but shuffles closer to Samson’s body, settling his bent head over her knees. She runs her fingers carefully over his hair, so the ends lick at her fingertips, then lets her hand settle, brushing her fingers against his scalp.

“I… thought we could leave,” she whispers. “No longer a leader with your strength gone, and with a fortune between us? I thought… far from our tribes, we could….”

Her voice cracks into tears, and her head falls to Samson’s as sobs wrack her body.

“They were in love,” Tadiel whispers, horrified.

“They said they wouldn’t….” Delilah cries at their feet. “I didn’t mean for—”

“So it seems.” Dagon shrugs, tearing his eyes from the sobbing, brokenhearted woman.

“This was my flaw,” Tadiel says, shaking his head.

“This? You made them love each other?”

“No. I… I safeguarded his strength,” Tadiel says.

“By putting it in his hair?”

“Keeping their hair uncut is a common Nazirite custom. It’s a sign of their devotion to the Lord.”

“You didn’t safeguard his strength in his devotion itself?”

Tadiel watches Delilah as she cries.

“He was just a man,” Tadiel answers eventually. “Not a great man. Not a man of particularly deep faith or particularly strong principles. It seemed an expedient solution.”

“Yes. I can see why.”

“So… all our meddling. All our power. All our work. And what do we have to show for ourselves?” Tadiel demands. His voice is rough, his eyes are wet.

“A dead man who never became a hero and a woman with a broken heart.”

“And if we’d left well enough alone?”

“That sounds like disobedience, Tadiel.”

Tadiel nods and takes a step farther away from Dagon. “Perhaps we should at least fight each other. For the look of the thing.”

“We could,” Dagon agrees. “Or we could call this a draw.”

Tadiel looks up at Dagon for a moment and then turns and walks away.

“I fear I’ll see you again, Dagon.”

He disappears before Dagon can reply, and Dagon leaves Delilah to her tears.

“It’s been a long time,” Tadiel says. He should have realized when he felt only one Demon on Earth today that it would be him.

Dagon nearly chokes on his wine. He’s halfway out of his rickety tavern chair before Tadiel sees him realize who he’s actually talking to and sink back down.

“You’re a long way from the action. Aren’t all the Angels supposed to be over at the crucifixion, singing praises or whatever it is Angels do these days?”

Despite his snappish tone, the Demon doesn’t seem to be serious.

“Heaven’s a little lax today.”

“Lax?”

Tadiel shrugs. “Victorious. And you?”

“Hell is taking the day off,” Dagon tells him, taking a deep gulp from his cup. “The higher levels are strategizing, and plebeians, like myself, are left without orders.”

“So you’ve come to Jerusalem to drink?”

“Damn quiet on a crucifixion day.” He holds his cup out to Tadiel, tipping it back and forth as though threatening to spill it. “Can I tempt you?”

Tadiel smiles. His heart feels light. Today things may finally change. He isn’t sure why he feels the need to share this with a traitor like Dagon, rather than his own side, but he found himself drawn here.

“Just this once.” He lowers himself primly into the chair on the other side of the table, and Dagon waves a hand at the tavernkeeper. Tadiel realizes Dagon must be visible to him and waits until the man has brought Dagon another cup of wine before allowing himself to be seen as well.

Dagon slides the cup across the table, raising a blond eyebrow at Tadiel. Tadiel takes a sip of the wine cautiously.

“How is it?” Dagon asks.

“Not what I expected. But good.” Tadiel glances back at the tavernkeeper, who’s watching the two of them nervously. They do stick out, Tadiel realizes. Well. The tavernkeeper will have a story to tell.

“So. The thousand talent question,” Dagon starts. “What does this change?”

“Everything,” Tadiel replies, taking another sip of his wine. It’s not as sour the second time. “God sacrifices his own son today to save them all. Every human’s soul should be heaven bound.”

“So God himself is repenting and, conveniently, managing to garnish every soul for his own side in the process.” Dagon sounds bitter as he takes another drink from his cup. Tadiel feels his smile start to fall.

“With everyone saved, maybe there won’t even be Armageddon.”

“Right.” Dagon snorts, holding his cup out in a gesture for a refill. “Lucifer will give in, and we will all go home and smell the flowers together, after we’ve already gone through a great battle in Heaven and millennia of plotting against each other.”

“Well, maybe not right away,” Tadiel admits, trying not to let Dagon ruin his optimism. They’ve maintained a… strange kind of friendship, but Dagon has still become a Demon and even on an auspicious day like today, it would be foolish to let his guard down completely. “But this will change things. God has sacrif—”

“His son for the humans and their thousands of daily sins, while what, Tadiel? A *third* of his children were sent to Hell for one small refusal, one challenge, and the whole stinking lot of murderers and rapists and thieves down here get their slates wiped clean?” Dagon leaned back in his chair. “Hell will never forgive. We have no reason to expect Heaven will forgive, and too much has passed for Heaven and Hell to reunite.”

“Maybe not the whole of Hell,” Tadiel concedes. He moves his hand slowly across the surface of the table. “But… perhaps a few… a few sheep could be brought back to the fold.” He sets his hand over Dagon’s, an old gesture he hasn’t made since they walked together in Heaven.

It’s different this time.

Where once it was just warmth, there’s an edge to it now. A tingle of energy Tadiel doesn’t know how to place. He looks up at Dagon, who is staring down at their hands like he feels it too.

A few moments pass before Dagon pulls his hand away and wraps it back around his cup. Tadiel echoes the movement, gulping down his wine.

“That’s what I miss about you, Tadiel,” Dagon says eventually. “Your damned hope.”

He tips the last of his wine back and disappears, leaving Tadiel alone at the table.

DAGON needs to sit down. He’s never been outright exhausted before.

This town’s been put under quarantine. No one gets out. No food or help gets in. Not that there’s much food to be had. So many people are dead in this fiefdom, crops are rotting in the field because there are so few people who can bring them in.

Between those who curse God for sending this horror down onto them and those who still sing his praises, even as they lie dying, souls are funneling into Heaven and Hell so fast Dagon’s surprised there is still room for them all.

A cart stops and starts its way down the road, picking up the dead from the few houses that aren’t empty yet. Dagon steps out of the street, sets himself against the wall of a little wattle and daub house with vacant-looking windows, and sinks down to the ground. A few minutes to rest, that is all he is asking.

He reclines back against the wall, blowing out a breath and closing his eyes. He should be working harder. He still hasn’t recovered his reputation from the disaster of the Samson and Delilah incident. While this plague is hardly the best opportunity to make an example of himself, he should at least be thinking of something to make himself stand out during an age where both sides are hauling souls off in wheelbarrows to plump their respective armies for the Apocalypse.

Every once in a while, Dagon remembers how sure everyone had been that Jesus would mark a momentous change in the long-term strategy, and he laughs to himself. But most of the time it’s not really that funny.

This wall is very comfortable. His feet hurt and getting off them feels good. He’s been on Earth too long. He’s starting to feel a little bit human.

“Master?” a tiny voice asks. Dagon curses under his breath. So many people really believe in Demons and Angels these days, it’s difficult for him to ever be totally invisible; though up until the plague it was rare for

someone to really see him instead of simply catching a fleeting glimpse. Now though, people can see Death stalking the land. One Demon probably isn't much of a challenge to human senses.

"Master? Are you dead?" There's a gentle swatting at his face. He tries to ignore it with dignity but fails. It stops when he opens his eyes.

Dagon finds himself looking at a little girl, all sunken eyes and bloody sores and dirty clothes. She's probably nearly dead herself if she can see him this easily, Dagon realizes.

"No. I'm not dead," he replies, pushing her away as gently as he can manage. He's shocked when she weighs nothing in his hands, like moving a box he didn't know was empty. "I'm a Demon."

The dying little girl shakes her head. "No. Saw a woodcut. Demons have got horrible faces and big wings. Like bats. Do you have any food, master?"

Dagon sighs—back to work already. "Every food you can imagine, dear. All of your favorites."

Her green eyes go wide in her wan face, and Dagon extends his hand out to her. "And all you have to do is shake—"

There is a sudden flash of blue light. It blazes across the street, brighter than any fire or lamp could ever be. Dagon looks up, and the girl, her bony arm already reaching toward him, ready to handshake her way into Hell, turns to see what he's looking at.

It's Tadiel.

He's dressed in the pale blue robes of Heaven, with his white wings spread wide. A string of people, or rather, the bright outlines of the souls, are following him out the front door of the house. While Dagon and the little girl watch, Tadiel takes the hand of each soul, presses a kiss to each forehead, and they turn to light, flashing heavenward in blazing aurora swirls.

Dagon has forgotten how beautiful it is. The ascension of the souls. The divinity of mercy.

The beatific look on Tadiel's face.

The little girl sways on her feet as she watches the souls fly upward, and she stumbles. Dagon reaches his hand out toward her again, and

something stops him.

Instead of shaking her hand and claiming her soul, Dagon reaches his arm up and waves, catching Tadiel's attention. The little girl rocks back off her knees, sitting down on the muddy ground. Her head falls back, and Dagon can see her eyes tracking the Angel as he sweeps regally across the road, his robes practically floating behind him and his wings held high and proud.

"Dagon?" he asks, confused.

"This child has informed me she is hungry, Tadiel," Dagon says. "I wonder if you might be willing to help her?"

Tadiel looks over at the little girl, who is staring up at him, mouth open wide. Tadiel looks down at her. Dagon sees the surprise on his face when he realizes she can see him, and the sadness as he realizes why.

"Of course." Tadiel looks down at her, then looks back at Dagon, still lying against the house. Dagon shrugs. Tadiel looks around, as though worried someone will see him, then crouches down so he is nearer the girl.

"Lie down and close your eyes," Tadiel tells her.

The little girl does exactly that, curling up like a cat on the muddy ground. Tadiel watches her. Dagon watches Tadiel.

His forehead is wrinkled in concentration. His bright-green eyes shine as he watches the little girl's breathing slow. Then he reaches his broad, pale hand out over her stilling body and takes her tiny hand in his own.

He tugs upward, and a glowing blue outline of an arm comes up in his hand, followed by the outline of a plumper and happier-looking girl. The girl smiles at Tadiel, then turns to Dagon, giving him a concerned once-over before turning back to Tadiel.

Still holding her hand, Tadiel bends to kiss her forehead, and then her soul is gone, winging its way to heaven in a glimmer of bright lights.

Tadiel looks at Dagon, opens his mouth, closes it.

Reaches out his hand.

Dagon takes it, shivering a little when that same spark from a thousand years ago spreads out over his skin, stronger than it was before. By Tadiel's short, quiet intake of breath, Dagon can tell he feels it too.

Tadiel gives him a shrouded, almost worried look.

He's still holding Dagon's hand.

"Well," Dagon says finally. "Back to work."

Tadiel nods, drops his hand, and turns away, gliding off into the darkness.

ANGELS aren't hard to find. Any human with a touch of the second sight can sense an Angel. A human with a sense of adventure and a knack for languages could summon one, and a human with those same traits and a lack of self-preservation instinct on top of them could even summon a Demon.

Dagon has realized before now he doesn't have to wait patiently for centuries and circumstances to let his and Tadiel's paths cross. He knows he has the power to simply go to where Tadiel is. He has had the power to seek out Tadiel's exact location, instead of a fuzzy estimate like with other Angels or Demons, ever since Tadiel took his hand in Jerusalem.

But up until now, he'd had no reason. And now he has one big, glaring reason why he shouldn't.

He *wants* to see him.

He hasn't seen Tadiel since the Black Death, and now, occasionally, he finds himself thinking about the Angel. About the last interaction between them: that long-held look and the lingering touch of hands.

He *has* been on Earth too long. This is not an Angelic thought or a Demonic thought. This is pure humanity, and he shouldn't be foolish enough to doubt Tadiel is, even with his occasional slips, still an Angel and still faithful.

Dagon still wants to see him.

And that exact look, and that touch, is the reason he can. He's not entirely sure if Tadiel realizes by taking Dagon's hand on Earth, he granted Dagon the ability to find him.

He stops in front of a long mirror, rakes his hair back, and brushes lint off the black velvet of his doublet. So far, the fifteenth century suits Dagon. The courts are enjoyable, the music is interesting, and it's one of the first times sin has sat so close to the clean and virtuous surface. Little

temptations go a long way, and bringing one person down can dissolve entire bloodlines, entire houses. It helps that humans have demonized so many little things over the years. No one in Heaven or Hell actually cares if a man eats meat on a Friday or if a woman feels lust. But humans do, and the impossibility they face—of being wholly virtuous, all the time—makes it easier to take their souls, which they all believe are Hell-bound anyway.

Plus, Dagon looks good in a doublet and hose.

He takes a breath, stills his mind, and seeks out Tadiel, who appears as a spark of silver in his consciousness.

He's not far. He's even in the same city. Dagon looks up at himself in the mirror, adjusts his hair one last time, and goes to him.

The smell hits him like a physical force.

It's like being in a slaughterhouse. Like blood and meat, but worse. The scent of burnt hair lingers at the edges of the overwhelming, palpable suffusion of rot.

He takes in the dark room. A few complicated machines, iron and gears, loom in the corners flashing evil-looking shadows against the walls as the torchlight wavers around them. A heavily built wooden table holds an array of odd little tools. Edges and blades and points. The table next to it is empty except for a heavy leather strap that lies crumpled across it. Four other straps hang down from it, one at each corner. Behind the tables, in one of the darker shadows, Dagon can make out the outline of some sort of chair with a bloody corpse strapped into it and realizes where he is.

What in the name of Heaven, Hell, and Earth is Tadiel doing inside the Inquisition?

Dagon turns around slowly, not sure he wants to see the other side of the horrific chamber.

And there, in the center of the room, sitting at the edge of another table full of tools and covered in soot and blood, is Tadiel.

Dagon takes a careful step toward the grimy Angel. His head is in his hands, and his breathing is careful and still. His shoulders are hunched and his feet hang down from the table, not quite touching the ground.

It makes him look small.

Dagon comes all the way up to him and stands next to him without the Angel moving. Then he reaches out and, as though Tadiel might break under his hands, brushes a thumb across his cheek, feeling wetness there.

Tadiel looks up, eyes wide and lost, and so, so green as they settle on Dagon's face.

"Dagon?" he rasps.

"You look like Hell," Dagon says with feeling.

Tadiel gulps. His gaze falls from Dagon's and falters over the contents of the room again. "It all looks like Hell."

"Not quite," Dagon replies. He lets his hand fall from Tadiel's face to his shoulder.

Tadiel's mouth finally closes, tightening into a thin line before he stammers, "You're here. You were sent here." He nods, and his eyes widen hopefully. "That's why I was sent here. For you. I was sent here because of you. You're… you're what I was sent to protect the Inquisitors from. Demonic temptation. You… you and Hell brought them to this, and I'm supposed to put them back on the path. What were you sent to offer them, Dagon?"

Tadiel is begging, and Dagon feels a chill down his spine as he pieces together what Tadiel's words don't say. The scene around them, right out of the artists of humanity's worst depictions of Hell, was Heaven sanctioned. Tadiel was sent here for its protection, and he's asking Dagon to tell him Hell actually holds the pliers and knives.

And Dagon can't lie.

He pauses, trying to think of a truth that will sound like what Tadiel wants to hear, but he has paused too long. Tadiel's face starts to fall. "Dagon? Dagon—" His fingers tangle into the fabric of Dagon's skirt. "Why are you here?

"For you," Dagon responds dumbly. The last time he saw Tadiel like this, the Angel threw him from Heaven. He knows what this is—this is Tadiel betrayed. And this time, it was by something bigger than just Dagon.

"For me?" Tadiel asks, bewildered. "To… to what?"

Dagon pushes the array of tools backward with a series of clangs and sits next to Tadiel. "Just… for you."

“Not for this?” Tadiel demands, shaking his fingers out over the grisly images in front of them.

“No. I’ve been….” Dagon hopes this will help, and wishes, again, that he could lie as he continues, “I’ve been… corrupting the clergy. You know. Planting the seeds of self-righteousness. Little infusions of pride here and there.”

Tadiel looks at him, eyes narrowing again. “But did you do this?”

“This?”

“Dagon… is this—” Tadiel waves a hand over the room. “Is what is happening here the work of Hell?”

Tadiel’s backed him into a corner, and Dagon responds in the only way he can. “No. It is not. It’s only the work of humans.”

“But I was sent here to protect it,” Tadiel says. “Why would… why?”

Dagon looks at the weeping Angel, then out over the bloody room again. He sets his hand against Tadiel’s, and Tadiel instantly grips it, like a drowning man tossed a rope.

“I… can see why,” Dagon admits. Whatever else is said about Hell, it does give you the ability to see pragmatic solutions. “It’s… it’s a soul factory.”

“What?” Tadiel gasps.

“Well… it’s… it’s like the Black Death… isn’t it? Large quantities of people, extreme circumstances… you see who truly has faith and who doesn’t. Who can believe through… all of this and who cannot. We cannot just gather the souls to be made pikemen and foot soldiers. Battalions need leaders. Leaders need to be tested by fire.”

“And knives and spikes and….” Tadiel’s voice breaks. “No. I cannot believe it. I will not. You’re… you’re trying to tempt me. That’s… you’re trying to drag me down to Hell with you.”

Dagon breathes out, grips Tadiel’s hand tighter, and looks him in the eye. “No, Tadiel. I am not.”

Tadiel’s mouth falls back open, and the tears threaten at the edges of his eyes again.

“Tadiel… we were friends once.”

“Yes.”

“Yes. And… we are under orders now.”

“Yes.”

“And Heaven’s orders are to protect this monstrosity.”

Tadiel’s reply is more of a garbled sob than an answer.

“Then, obviously… Hell would want it destroyed.”

“It must produce souls for Hell as well,” Tadiel whispers, sounding hopeful.

“But Hell has given no orders either way.” Dagon loosens his grip on Tadiel’s hand, slips off the table, and stands. “And initiative is looked on favorably.”

“Dagon?”

“I’m going to burn this place to the ground.”

“And you’re doing that for Hell?”

Dagon looks at him. “No. Not for Hell.”

Dagon’s not sure what he was hoping his declaration would earn him, though he had been hoping for more than Tadiel’s vacant expression.

But now he has promised. He walks to the far corner of the room and places his hand on one of the devices. Imagination is a human trait, not a Demonic one, and he can’t imagine what the thing does; though, based on the heavy wooden casing and the sharp metal spikes on the inside, he thinks he can make an educated guess.

The wood begins to smolder under his fingers, and he holds his hand down until the flames lick all the way up to his black velvet-encased elbows. He walks to the adjacent corner and burns the other device as well. When he turns back around, Tadiel hasn’t moved. He’s watching Dagon, like he might stare at a painting in a throne room. Something… separate from him. A product of an action that has already taken place.

Dagon keeps his eyes on Tadiel and walks back toward him. He sets one hand on the table with the leather straps and lets it burn, then turns toward the table covered in torture instruments. He bends his head over it and outstretches his arms, watching the blood crusting the surface of the rough iron implements crack and flame before the metal turns liquid and

pours through the cracks and grooves of the burning table surface. The metal pings as it hits the stone floor and starts to cool.

A rasping, barely audible over the burning of the wood, makes Dagon turn.

"Errrsss… mmmm… me… me."

The sound comes from what Dagon had thought was a ravaged corpse, and even after centuries on Earth, punctuated with the occasional brief visit to Hell, the sight gives him pause.

"M… merrr… mer… cy."

Dagon's stomach, which he would have thought a thousand wars and a rebellion against God himself would have made strong, roils when he realizes what's left of this human is a woman.

Dagon glances back at Tadiel, still perched at the edge of the table, his dazed expression turning to horror as he comes to the same realization as Dagon.

"Dagon?" His voice quavers as he slides off the table and comes over, raising a hand over her which he immediately lets fall.

"She is righteous," Tadiel breathes out in horror.

Dagon nearly reaches out to grab Tadiel again. Her soul can be sent to Heaven, but only if she dies. And since Tadiel cannot kill a righteous woman, she'll have to burn alive.

"Arrr… are younn ang… nnangel?" the woman gurgles.

Tadiel lets out a broken sob. Dagon looks up at him and makes a decision. He kneels so he and the woman are eye to eye.

"Today I am the Angel of Death," he breathes.

"Yee… ee… ss."

The woman's eyes fall shut, and Dagon casts around for something sharp that he hasn't melted. Tadiel has wrapped his arms tightly around himself, staring at the woman.

Dagon goes over to the table where he and Tadiel had sat and picks up a blade, scorching the entire table and its contents to ash in one burst of magic before he turns back to Tadiel and the woman, kneeling down near her as the flames begin to lick closer.

“Th… nk… yo… u.”

Dagon nods and slides the blade quickly between her ribs, into her heart. She gasps, then sighs, then dies.

He melts the blade, letting the iron drip from his hands like water, then reaches back for Tadiel’s hand and pulls the Angel from the room as flagstones on the floor begin to glow orange.

Tadiel is utterly unresisting in Dagon’s hand. Dagon feels like a child dragging a rag doll behind him as he tugs the Angel out of the burning building.

“Tadiel? Shield yourself,” Dagon warns as they step out of the building and into the sunlight. People are already gathering in a panic. A workman with a leather cap is shouting through his hands, trying to organize a bucket chain between the flaming building and the river. Dagon drags the still eerily compliant Angel across the city, wondering if he should have taken into account that someone’s head is going to roll when it’s discovered the Inquisition was attacked before he burnt the place to ash.

Well. The Inquisition has many nests, and this will only make the Church more paranoid. The Princes of Hell will be impressed if it turns out Dagon has made things even worse. Hopefully impressed enough not to question what else may have driven him to do it.

“Where are we going?” Tadiel finally asks.

“An inn,” Dagon replies.

“Why?”

“Are you going back to Heaven right now? After that?”

Tadiel doesn’t reply, and Dagon returns to being visible as they walk up to an inn. A well-appointed one, and well suited for the type of aristocrat Dagon prefers to pass himself off as.

The man at the door takes the handful of coins with a gleam in his eyes, tells him the room number, and hands him his key. Dagon rains more coins down into his hands.

“And have a bath drawn immediately. Hot, mind you.” He wags a finger at the man, who touches his forelock and ducks into an obnoxious little bow.

Tadiel is looking around the receiving room of the inn as though he is confused as to how he was brought here. Dagon sets his hand to the small of Tadiel's back and gently guides him upstairs to the room.

He takes him down the hallway, into their room, and across the room, all the way to the edge of the bed. When the Angel doesn't move, Dagon pushes down gently on Tadiel's shoulders. Tadiel seems to understand suddenly and drops down on the mattress. When it bounces underneath him, Tadiel looks down at it suspiciously and experimentally bounces a few more times.

"You truly don't spend much time on Earth, do you?" Dagon asks. His gaze flicks over to the corner of the room, and he is relieved there is a large, circular wooden tub in the room itself. He would not want to drag Tadiel down to a shared bathhouse in his current state.

"Enough to seek the refuge of Heaven," Tadiel replies, a sharp, angry edge to his voice.

There is a knock at the door. Dagon opens it and ushers in several attendants with a cart full of steaming kettles. They pour the kettles into the tub with nearly dance-like coordination, while one of the younger men strews sweet herbs into the water. Dagon drops a handsome tip into each of their hands as they leave.

"How does a Demon get money?" Tadiel asks as tendrils of steam creep out from the tub and over the room.

"We make it," Dagon answers, undoing his doublet. "It fades away after a few days, but it's enough. Money is one of those morally neutral things that causes so much trouble. Like lust, or brilliance."

"Of course."

From an Angel that should sound damning, but it only sounds defeated.

"Come. Let's have that place washed off you."

"I could stop being dirty," Tadiel replies.

"But you haven't, and we shouldn't risk more magic while we're together. It wouldn't do to draw the eyes of Heaven or Hell to us," Dagon points out. "And this is better. Trust me. Hot water is the best thing ever not made sinful."

Tadiel's blank eyes fall on the tub, a touch of light coming back into them.

Dagon shrugs out of his doublet and tosses it over the writing desk pushed up against the window. He rolls back the sleeves of his chemise as Tadiel stands and crosses to the tub, peering over it as though worried something will jump out at him.

"Tadiel," Dagon sighs. He reaches out slowly and pinches the tie of Tadiel's shirt between his thumb and forefinger, drawing the string out of the knot and letting Tadiel's collar fall open before starting on the buttons of his doublet. Tadiel stands, patient, exhausted, and trusting, as Dagon unlaces his tightly done-up sleeves and peels them away, then carefully pushes Tadiel's doublet and skirt off as well, leaving Tadiel standing in his shirt and hose.

Tadiel looks down at himself, then back up at Dagon, who is also in his shirt and hose. Dagon waits for a moment, before it occurs to him Tadiel doesn't realize there are subsequent steps. He remembers Tadiel's first sip of wine a thousand years ago. Angels just come to Earth. They don't *experience* it.

Dagon sighs and reaches out for the hem of Tadiel's shirt; then, suddenly unsure, he retracts his hands. He pulls his own shirt off and looks up. Tadiel is already mirroring his movement, dropping his fine linen shirt onto the floor on top of his doublet. Without prompting, Tadiel begins unlacing his hose.

The sculpted muscles of his arms glide gently under his marble skin as he makes small movements, and Dagon finds himself tracking every quiet motion, eyes sliding from the Angel's arms to his chest, over the crests of muscle there leading down to the firm planes of his stomach. More skin comes into view as Tadiel pulls the hose and smallclothes carefully down off his slim hips.

Dagon watches him. The feeling watching Tadiel undress causes is like the feeling he gets from holding Tadiel's hand, but the jolt is more intense and it warms his whole body instead of only the point where their fingers meet.

"Dagon?" Tadiel asks.

Dagon extends an arm toward the tub, inviting Tadiel in. Tadiel looks down curiously at himself again, like he's never seen his entire body at once before, which, Dagon realizes, he may not have.

Tadiel lifts a foot and sets it into the water. The surprised, breathy groan of enjoyment he lets loose as his strong-looking legs sink into the hot water fans the strange feelings that continue to spark in Dagon's body. He feels the tingling heat spread out from his chest down through his stomach before it warms again in his groin.

Tadiel slowly settles into the water, the groan becoming steadily more guttural as the heat laps over more and more of his alabaster skin. Dagon licks his lips and kneels down next to the tub as Tadiel leans back against the side and his eyes finally pop open. Dagon smiles at him, and the corners of Tadiel's mouth curve reluctantly upward.

"This does help," Tadiel admits. He sighs and lets his head fall back. The pale column of his throat is enticing, and Dagon finds himself desperate to touch the skin there, but afraid of the consequences on the sensation still roiling in his body. He resists, picking up the soft cloth that hangs over the edge of the tub and dipping it into the warm water. Tadiel watches him, eyelids drooping.

Dagon brings the wetted cloth up to Tadiel's neck and wipes at the grime there.

Tadiel makes another noise of enjoyment, maybe even pleasure, and Dagon shifts his position as his hose starts to feel restrictive.

He scrubs small circles against Tadiel's skin, moving slowly over his throat, swirling the cloth in the dip between the Angel's collarbones before slipping back over the tendon and up toward his ear. Tadiel's eyes drift closed and his face falls to the side with a soft exhale, giving Dagon freer access to his skin. Dagon concentrates on his scrubbing.

"Why are you doing this, Dagon?" Tadiel whispers.

"You're dirty."

"No. Disobeying Hell for me. Protecting me from Heaven. I don't kill you when I should because I believe you can be saved. I know there is good still in you. But I know you have your orders. If you are not trying to tempt me or disgrace me, then why?"

Dagon looks up at Tadiel's face, but Tadiel is deliberately avoiding his glance.

"I'm not wholly sure."

"Your best estimate, then."

"I… I feel I can never know Heaven, and I can never know Hell, but I've always known you."

Tadiel doesn't reply, and Dagon goes back to washing him. Tadiel's face relaxes, his eyes closed again. The lines of white shining through the brownish grime on his face show where his skin was held creased for so long. With a sudden dip in his stomach that cuts into the warm buzz under his skin, Dagon realizes how dirty Tadiel was when he found him, and wonders, in a horrified burst, how long Tadiel had been in the chamber before Dagon had stumbled upon him.

He brings the cloth up the other side of Tadiel's neck, watching as Tadiel's suddenly more peaceful face turns back toward him. He scrubs down to Tadiel's shoulders, listening as the Angel's breath slows and deepens.

Small circles turn to long strokes over his firm arms and along his taut stomach. Dagon lets the cloth unwind in his hand as he strokes, until the cloth is just one thin layer wrapped around his fingers. One layer between his fingers and Tadiel's body. He drops his arm down farther, wiping a careful streak over Tadiel's thigh, muscles tight even in their relaxed state.

His fingers traveling over the curves and grooves of muscles in Tadiel's legs makes the strain against his hose even harder to ignore, and Dagon shifts his weight, gasping when he accidently bumps his groin into the side of the tub and sparks pop behind his eyes.

Tadiel's eyes open at the sound, but flutter closed again as Dagon keeps running the cloth over his body.

"I do like this." Tadiel sighs.

Dagon doesn't trust himself to answer. He presses his hips to the tub, tight enough for his skin to pinch slightly between wooden tub wall, the cloth, and bone, but not quite tight enough to take the pressure off his growing arousal.

He hadn't expected lust, not for Tadiel. He had loved Tadiel, and, still cares for him, if his flamboyant denial of Hell is anything to go by. But his

rushing blood and dry mouth are unmistakable. Lust.

He feels something oddly like guilt when his eyes settle on Tadiel's face. Dagon is trying to seek some relief for his arousal against the warm wood of the tub, and Tadiel is lying still and relaxed, closed eyes fanning long black crescents over his cheeks, flushed rose by the warm water. Innocent and practically sleeping.

Dagon wets his lips and tries to focus on Tadiel's face, bringing the cloth up and out of the water to wipe carefully at Tadiel's chin. He reveals more porcelain skin with each gentle motion, moving over one cheek, then the other, bringing the cloth over his thin, delicate nose, then over the bone that arches into his eyebrows. He brushes it over Tadiel's forehead and watches as the few remaining creases fall away under the warm water.

Tadiel's lips fall open with a soft, contented noise. Dagon lets the cloth slide back over Tadiel's cheek, and unable to resist, slides it farther down, along the swell of Tadiel's full lower lip.

He doesn't realize how close he has leaned in, until Tadiel's eyes open and he nearly falls into them.

"Dagon?" Tadiel asks in a small, confused voice.

"I'm sorry," Dagon replies. He crosses the remaining fraction of an inch between their faces like a street performer on a tightrope and presses his lips to Tadiel's.

Tadiel accepts the kiss the same way he had accepted being dragged to the inn and the cleansing of his body: without resistance but without participation.

Dagon cautiously pulls back. Tadiel is watching him, pink and still.

Dagon waits for him to say something, then clears his throat and looks away when the Angel is silent. He casts around for some action to cover the kiss Tadiel may still be too much of an Angel to understand. He feels like his heart is being stretched on the rack, the agonizing pull making it impossible for him to form words.

Dagon sees the abandoned washcloth lying spread across the Angel's stomach. He drops his hand down to fetch it and gulps as his fingers settle against the cloth. Underneath, Tadiel's cock is even harder than his own. Dagon glances up at Tadiel, whose wide eyes are trained on Dagon's hand. His skin is flushing even pinker, and Dagon realizes it was never steam; it was arousal.

He traces his thumb up Tadiel's length. Tadiel sucks in a breath as Dagon's thumb moves, huffing the collected air out sharply as Dagon circles the head.

Tadiel finally moves, his hand lifting from the bottom of the tub. He grips Dagon's wrist and holds Dagon away from him a moment, but blows out a slow breath and traces his fingers over Dagon's wrist and up his arm. Dagon holds his hand still in Tadiel's grip.

"I miss you." Tadiel's whisper is so quiet Dagon barely hears it, even this close to him in the silent room. That wide pull on his heart stops, everything in his chest suddenly snapping back into place. "Since you left Heaven, I've missed you." His hands continue up Dagon's arm, over his shoulder, his fingers settling against Dagon's neck as he leans up to kiss Dagon back.

It takes Dagon a moment to recover from the shock, and then he is easing the kiss open, with Tadiel clumsily following along in a way that makes Dagon ache. This, this kiss, is something Tadiel is giving him, this little vulnerability, this uncertain action he is inventing as he goes along. Only Dagon has felt this with him.

Dagon reservedly touches his tongue to Tadiel's, and Tadiel responds with his own careful exploration of Dagon's mouth, rocking his hips up incrementally when Dagon moves his fingers lightly against his stomach, creeping back down to his cock.

Dagon feels like he's trying to hunt a butterfly with a musket. Tadiel is still an Angel; he is still loyal to Heaven. Dagon is still a lip service enemy. And while lust itself may be neutral, the things it inspires—envy, anger, adultery, deceit—are come down on hard by Heaven. The two of them are tiptoeing along a very thin line together.

Hell's concern isn't with sin but allegiance. Dagon's one of the few Demons he knows who has never taken a human lover, and tempting an Angel should get him some kind of commendation… but this isn't really temptation. Tadiel's pruned fingers slipping cautiously into the hair at the nape of Dagon's neck, Tadiel's tiny, inarticulate noises, half swallowed, aren't really temptation.

Not completely.

Not yet.

Dagon trails his hand across the last intimidating inch down Tadiel's stomach, throws the cloth off Tadiel's cock and into the water, and wraps his fist around Tadiel's length. Tadiel rocks out of the kiss with a gasp, knocking his head against the lip of the tub with a loud *thunk*.

Dagon is too distracted by the way Tadiel's hips inch up into his hand, dragging the blazing velvet skin across his palm, to laugh. He strokes up, awed at how hot and hard Tadiel is in his hand, at the way Tadiel's bright-green eyes are so wide. The way they watch his face as he bites his lip and glides his hand back up the Angel's shaft.

Dagon swirls his thumb around the rounded head of Tadiel's cock, brushing over the slit and feeling the slight stickiness, which coats his thumb even under the water. Tadiel's mouth falls open, soundless and red and wet, when Dagon pumps his fist up and down again, dragging the folded skin back up on his stroke, and Dagon surges over to capture those open lips with his own. They are warm and not quite as soft as they look. The firmness of them presses back against Dagon's mouth as he turns his head, trying new angles, looking for better ways to kiss Tadiel, and the Angel's breathing goes harsh against him, hot puffs of air bursting over his face as he kisses deeper. He wants to hear new noises pouring out of Tadiel, wants to hear him *let go*.

His mission is distracted by the way Tadiel's hips jerk up into his hand, threading his thick, heavy cock through Dagon's fist. Dagon tightens his grip and Tadiel's body convulses, splashing waves of water against the tub walls. His face jerks away from the kiss with a nonsensical mutter, leaving Dagon to plant his lips at a spot underneath his chin, earning him a huff of breath.

It's too little. He's too far from all the skin he wants to touch, all the kisses he wants to press all over Tadiel. With another run of his hand over Tadiel's skin, Dagon pulls his reluctant hand out of the water. Tadiel whines and turns back to him, his wide eyes demanding explanation. Dagon spares him a quick, apologetic smile and drops his hands to the ties on his hose, wet fingers stumbling over the laces in his hurry to divest himself.

He could magic them off, as Tadiel could have magicked himself clean, but he's hesitant to risk calling attention to them. For all that Heaven and Hell claim omnicognizance, if Angels and Demons don't use their powers, they're almost invisible.

Besides. As long as they're doing the tarantella across the wall between Heaven and Hell anyway, it seems right to do this the human way.

Dagon lets out a groan of relief as he pulls his hose down. His cock is so hard now it stands up against his stomach, wet at the tip and so very ready for reciprocation. Tadiel's eyes trace over Dagon's skin with rapt fascination, rather than the idle curiosity with which he'd regarded his own body. Dagon reaches down to stroke himself, mouth watering at the way Tadiel watches the movement of Dagon's hand and bites his lip as the motion of Dagon's hand brings a pearl of wetness out of him.

"Dagon," Tadiel implores. Dagon is already stepping over the tub, cock bobbing painfully with his movements. He sets his foot down at the outside of Tadiel's thigh, and Tadiel gulps when Dagon lets his toes drag across the firm muscles at the tops of Tadiel's thighs. He cranes his head back to watch as Dagon shifts his weight over and does the same thing on the other side before the Demon lowers himself to his knees, settling into the warm water until flesh meets flesh.

Tadiel's hands creep up over Dagon's thighs and around his hips, pulling him closer. He still has that dazed, overwhelmed look on his reddened face. Dagon dives back down into another kiss. Tadiel presses back, hands dropping back down to Dagon's thighs, fingers bruising into the skin like he's hanging off a ledge and about to drop.

Dagon's never had anyone pressed to him like this. Tadiel's skin is soft and warm. The muscles below the surface are firm and strong as they make small movements against the surprisingly sensitive skin on the inside of Dagon's thighs.

Tadiel's hands wrench away from his legs, and Dagon feels the Angel's knuckles drag up, pausing when his thumbs meet Dagon's hipbone, where it's still a little sore from his failed attempt not to rut against the tub. Dagon murmurs against Tadiel's lips, a sound that doesn't quite manage to be the Angel's name, and drops his hand back down between the Angel's legs, taking his cock with more assurance than before. He's ready when Tadiel's head presses back against the tub wall on his stroke this time, almost as though he's trying to get away. Dagon follows along with the motion, pressing forward as Tadiel moves back, keeping their lips pressed together. Tadiel gasps, and Dagon lets his tongue probe into Tadiel's mouth as he continues to stroke.

His own full cock is desperate between his legs, throbbing with a stronger pulse of desire at every sound or movement that Tadiel, nearly mewling under Dagon's ministrations, makes. The heady knowledge that he's the one making Tadiel gasp and whimper, that he's the one making someone who has always been so obedient and devoted dance at the edge of sin, *for him*, is too much of a reason to ignore his own longing and continue on, bringing Tadiel higher and higher.

Tadiel thrusts up into his hand again, and the head of his cock hits the underside of Dagon's. Angel and Demon cry out together at the slide.

"Tadiel?" Dagon pants, firming his grip around the gasping Angel's cock and pitching his hips forward, begging. Tadiel yanks away from the kiss, turning his head again, and gulps in air. Dagon strokes up faster and harder, watching the way the muscles in Tadiel's jaw work before dropping down to kiss them. He marks a path up Tadiel's face, over to his ear.

"Tadiel, please."

Dagon jerks forward as he feels the water rush against his hips and then feels Tadiel's hand slap against the skin there. Tadiel digs his fingers into the muscle, and Dagon rocks forward against his hand.

"Touch me, Tadiel," he begs, dropping kisses down along any part of Tadiel he can reach—his chin and cheek, his ear. He kisses the spot underneath Tadiel's ear, and when Tadiel makes his most aroused noise yet, practically a scream, Dagon can't keep himself from pressing another kiss there, letting his bottom teeth scrape against the skin.

Tadiel's fingers gripping into his skin *hurt* now, he's clasping so tight. Dagon pushes even closer.

"Mmmhhh, Dagon, hhmm," Tadiel manages. Dagon thrusts up against Tadiel, brushing the head of his rock hard cock against Tadiel's flat stomach and moaning at the sudden friction. Tadiel's hand finally loosens around his hip, and his fingertips stutter over Dagon's stomach. Dagon runs his teeth harder against Tadiel's skin when he feels the loose but still promising grip around his cock.

"Go on, go on," Dagon pants into Tadiel's ear. The sound Tadiel makes in response is more whine than moan. Dagon presses even farther forward against the Angel's body, as though trying to pin him in place, afraid he'll escape.

Which, considering how far out of his usual habits Dagon has pushed Tadiel and how many of their meetings over the millennia have ended with Tadiel popping back to Heaven, isn't an unreasonable fear.

Tadiel's stroke is distracted, stuttering every time Dagon runs his palm over the head of Tadiel's cock. It's frustrating, but intoxicating to know such a small application of skin against skin has reduced an entity as powerful as Tadiel to incoherency. But Dagon's been desperate for this for what has felt like eternity, even to him. He can feel himself approaching some sort of edge, just from touching Tadiel and listening to him, but he needs more.

He lets go of Tadiel, feeling a pang in his heart at the disappointed groan that escapes the Angel. He wraps his fist around Tadiel's hand, squeezing both their fists tighter around his cock, and pulls up.

The flash of relief at getting the touch he craves is short lived. The desperate lust coiling in his belly like molten lead crests higher as Tadiel bats his hand away and replaces it with his own, playing up and down Dagon's shaft in perfect mimicry of the motion Dagon had been using on him.

It suddenly occurs to Dagon that Tadiel, with his shocked little gasps at every press of Dagon's lips or at Dagon's hand's every touch, was as new to this as he was to the concept of a bath or a bed. While Dagon had never taken a lover, he had at least seen it as his Demonic duty to have some firsthand experience of lust, even if it was his own hand. But Tadiel, as he should have expected, really is a thousand years innocent.

Tadiel is looking between their bodies, watching the motion of his hand like a novice troubadour only now learning his instrument, and Dagon, with a flash of heat that burns in his heart as well as his cock, thrusts up into Tadiel's grip. It's still too little, too slow, as gentle as he feels he needs to be with Tadiel, but not everything he wishes Tadiel would do to him. He flushes a little at the honor of being the only person who has ever had this experience with Tadiel. Though the Angel still resides in Heaven, where all Angels have their places and titles and designations and expectations and they all love each other in the same way, Tadiel only loves *him* like this.

Tadiel glances up at him, cheeks flushed, eyes soft and a little questioning. Dagon smiles and bends back into the kiss, wrapping his hands

around Tadiel's neck and trying to suppress his urge to rock up desperately into Tadiel's not-quite-tight-enough grip.

He aches as Tadiel's hand leaves his cock, then yelps as that hand scoops under his ass, shoving him forward. Tadiel wraps his fist around both their cocks together this time.

Dagon's arms fly up around Tadiel's shoulders as he rushes his hands over their tight-pressed cocks, babbling now, words like "want" and "more" and "all right?" Dagon sets one hand on the wall of the tub, gripping tight to steady himself, and he reaches into the hair at the nape of Tadiel's neck and holds on.

"Better," Tadiel gasps, his body shivering against Dagon's as he brings his hand up their shafts. Dagon can't tell if it's a question or not and so responds by dropping his face back to Tadiel's ear.

"Glorious," he moans. The water is washing against the tub walls, lapping over them and splashing out onto the floor with their movements. Dagon worries his teeth against that exciting spot he's discovered, moaning with pleasure at the way it makes Tadiel's shivering turn to shaking, his panting turn to gasping. He can feel the indefinable edge, the hard-to-articulate destination he seems to be striving for, approaching, leaping forward with every piece of cut-off gibberish coming out of Tadiel's mouth.

Dagon has a fraction of a moment to wonder why no one has thought to promise *this* in paradise before Tadiel rocks erratically up into him and his whole body jolts forward. Dagon finds himself suddenly against and around Tadiel instead of over him, their chests and stomachs and cocks suddenly crushed together and his arms around Tadiel, who cries out, convulses, and then collapses in his arms.

His small, breathless "Dagon?" is all it takes to bring Dagon over that edge. He falls apart in Tadiel's arms, the seed spilling out of him, warmer against his hands than the water cooling around them.

Dagon falls forward into Tadiel, letting his breathing settle as Tadiel's hands clasp around his waist.

"Don't disappear," Dagon says stupidly into Tadiel's hair, which still smells slightly of the Inquisition chamber, though there is something sweet and hard to place underneath the scent

Tadiel doesn't answer, just continues to pant against Dagon's neck. Dagon, despite the slight worry he still holds that they are being watched, runs a hand through Tadiel's hair, magicking it clean. After a moment's thought, he traces a finger through the water, cleansing and rewarming it as well.

Tadiel shivers at the sudden change in temperature and wriggles underneath Dagon. Dagon sinks down and forward on his knees, pressing against Tadiel and wrapping his hands around Tadiel's wrists. He thumbs along the skin there and leans forward to kiss him. Tadiel turns his face away, and Dagon feels something akin to a blade through the stomach as he plants a kiss to Tadiel's cheek.

"What's the matter?"

Tadiel doesn't answer. He casts his eyes down at his arms, where Dagon is touching him.

"I am uncertain."

Dagon tries not to gulp at the sudden chill in his stomach, like he has swallowed ice. Tadiel doesn't elaborate, and Dagon prompts, "Uncertain?"

"I have done wrong," Tadiel replies. He pulls his arms out of Dagon's grip, but after a moment settles them around Dagon's waist. "But… I can't be assured of when."

"I am assured I have not done wrong," Dagon offers. Tadiel glances back up to him, but only briefly.

"What is wrong to a Demon?" He sighs. "I was sent to guard the Inquisition. I let you burn it. I watched you kill a woman and set loose a soul I should have claimed."

"Do you think what the Inquisition does is right?"

"It is holy," Tadiel answers, forehead creasing deeply as he frowns. "And I have—" He darts a glance between their close-pressed nakedness. "I have lain with you."

Dagon waits again. Tadiel doesn't continue.

"And you regret it?"

"I have battled and killed other Demons. I have smote them with the full wrath of Heaven. But never you. I have watched you destroy something I was sent to protect, because it was grotesque, and I have watched you spare a woman pain and save a child's soul. I have seen you do good, and I have believed you were good at heart." Tadiel has grown rigid underneath

him. The relaxation in his muscles drains away as the wrinkles creep back around his eyes and the tension crawls back into his body. “And… though I believed you to be capable of being saved, and though I… though you were beloved to me, I….” Tadiel’s voice goes quiet again. His grip around Dagon’s waist tightens. “I cast you out and made you into this. Your Fall is my doing. My fault. And since then, I feel I’ve done nothing right.”

Tadiel leans forward, setting his forehead to Dagon’s chest, and Dagon shivers. He knows what Tadiel isn’t saying. He knows Tadiel needs to alleviate his guilt. While every time he deviated from Heaven’s orders would still weigh on him, the burden would be less if Dagon gave Tadiel his forgiveness.

And Demons cannot lie.

But, because Dagon wishes he could forgive Tadiel for his expulsion, or at least because, even if he cannot say it, he wants to make Tadiel feel forgiven, he leans forward and presses a kiss to the crown of Tadiel’s head.

“Tadiel? Have you ever eaten?” Dagon asks.

It’s a clumsy, transparent change of subject, but Tadiel doesn’t pull away, just responds, “No.”

“Nothing bests the fish in Valencia,” Dagon tells him.

“I don’t think we should risk it,” Tadiel answers. “We may have already attracted attention today.”

“A little minor magic,” Dagon argues.

“And a nest of the Inquisition’s hive burnt to cinders and a history of suspicious attachment consummated,” Tadiel replies. “I should return to Heaven.”

“If you must.”

Tadiel finally pulls his head from Dagon’s chest and catches Dagon's lips in another kiss.

When the kiss finally ends, the water’s gone cold again.

TADIEL retreats to Heaven and spends much of the next hundred years in the Garden. Sometimes he goes to sing praises, sometimes he welcomes souls at the gates, but usually, he simply sits, feeling the divine love that infuses his home and the pleasant contentedness it brings to his heart. It’s a

nice feeling, and it does much to soothe the doubt that has afflicted him in his time on Earth.

But it can't *eradicate* the doubt.

He is, possibly under the influence of a particular Demon, actually looking around him this time. He notices the other Angels more than he once did. How they may walk together, or talk together, but they never seem truly… attached, as he is to Dagon. He notices none of them seem to know or remember much about the souls they have gathered. He can remember losing the blind weaver to Hell, and going back fifteen years later for the man's wife, or during the plague taking the two oldest children in an orphanage—who watched after the other children and kept them strong in faith—but the other Angels don't remember people any more than they would remember grains of sand.

He is lonely in Heaven now, in a way that cannot be satisfied.

And so he returns to his work on Earth.

Dagon watches fondly as Tadiel erupts out of his seat, already clapping, bits of honeyed nuts from the package Dagon had bought him still sticking to his fingers. Tadiel's not alone in his enthusiasm, either. The actors playing dead in the Capulets' tomb seem startled as they rush up from the fake stone slab. The applause crests as the actors reach the edge of the stage and drop into their bows. Dagon stands up and sets his hand to the small of Tadiel's back as the Angel pounds his hands together, brushing a tear away with the flat of his palm between claps. He leans over and says into Tadiel's ear, "I knew you'd like this."

"It's wonderful," Tadiel replies, and Dagon can't keep the smile off his face. "Why haven't we ever done this before?"

"I took you to one of those mystery plays in fifteen… something or other. Early fifteen hundreds."

Tadiel shrugs dismissively. "Oh. Those. Bible plays on carts? No… this is different. This is…."

"Wonderful?" Dagon suggests.

"Yes," Tadiel replies, clapping again as Tybalt and the Nurse come out for their bow. "Sad and… perfect."

Dagon laughs and sets his lips against Tadiel's ear. "I'll bring you back for tomorrow's show."

Tadiel clears his throat and pulls away. "Dagon, not in public. Things have changed."

Dagon listens, pulling back, though probably not quite as far as Tadiel would prefer. "Tadiel? We look rich. And not merchant-class rich, as you usually dress—aristocracy rich. We can do what we please, trust me."

Dagon tucks his hand around Tadiel's slim waist, gliding over the rich velvet of Tadiel's doublet, and tugs him in for another quick, barely concealed press of lips to his ear before letting him go and stepping back. The applause slowly dies down, and the groundlings began to filter out of the theater.

"And you thought it was going to be another dull history play." Dagon laughs.

"Well, that's what Shakespeare does, right? Richard. Henry. We were there. They were dull the first time."

"Well, I'm willing to guess, after the reaction here today, he'll be writing a lot more like this."

"Yes. You're probably right." Tadiel casts a yearning look at the stage. "I think I would like to come back tomorrow."

Dagon stretches and hands Tadiel his little paper cone of honeyed nuts back. Tadiel takes one as they shuffle out between a pair of maidens and their very severe-looking chaperone and thumbs it into his mouth, eyes flicking up appreciatively, not unlike the way they flick up when Dagon touches his cock. Dagon laughs at him.

"What?" Tadiel asks, lips still around his thumb.

"Just… you and your little temptations. Sweets. Theater."

Tadiel smiles at him. "Yes. Well. My terrible taste in company does not help."

"A fair point," Dagon concedes as they step out into the street. Dusk is beginning to fall. An edge of wet cold is seeping into the air.

"And Earth has become… much more enjoyable since the end of feudalism." Tadiel sighs happily, eating another nut.

“Really? I was going to say since the Reformation,” Dagon replies, turning along a dark side road, away from the main streets. It is a lovely night. They can enjoy the fresh air a little while longer before going back to their respective front lines.

“Why the Reformation?”

“Because of the way it simplified our lives.”

“Simplified? How mad are you? The split loyalties, the new divisions. Take a good second look at the room we’ve just departed. The souls in there? How many were devoted enough for me to gather or you to corrupt? Maybe a third? And no one really top tier, either. People aren’t devoted to God anymore; their love and loyalty is to their business. Their arts. Their political positions. Even amongst the devout, it’s not God versus Lucifer anymore; it’s Catholic versus Protestant. God versus the Pope. Elizabeth versus Mary. Even in Spain, it became God versus Torquemada.”

Dagon nods. They usually don’t mention the Inquisition.

Tadiel continues, “Every day it gets harder to find infantry for Heaven’s army. It used to take hours to pick up a few souls, and now you have to be down here for days at a time to find anyone worth gathering.”

“Or worth tempting,” Dagon agrees. “Which means”—he reaches over, digging a few candied pieces out of Tadiel’s paper cone—“that we have a perfect excuse to spend more time enjoying the pleasures of this world, without anyone looking over our shoulders, wondering why we aren’t bringing more people back to Heaven and Hell.”

Tadiel snorts but nods, acknowledging the point. Dagon pops the treat into his mouth, then looks down in distaste at his sticky fingers where the honey pulls at his skin. He sticks his thumb in his mouth, sucking the honey off.

Tadiel laughs at him. “That’s an odd thing to be squeamish about. For a Demon.”

“Quiet,” Dagon huffs around his thumb. Tadiel tries to straighten his face but doesn’t manage it. Dagon gives him a disapproving look and glances down the street at the one shopkeeper in view, adjusting the sign outside his store. After the man steps back inside, he grabs Tadiel’s hand.

Tadiel gives him an appraising look as Dagon presses the Angel’s finger to his lips and darts his tongue out to lick teasingly at the pad.

Tadiel's smile goes a little stiff. Curious, Dagon flattens his tongue and lets it slide farther down. The smile fades from Tadiel's face like mist burning under sunlight. Dagon steps closer to him, shoots a glance back down the street, then sets the tip of Tadiel's finger on his tongue and closes his mouth around it.

Tadiel's whimper goes straight Dagon's cock, and he follows, mouth still closed around Tadiel's finger when Tadiel takes a shaky step backward, falling against the brick wall behind them like his knees can't support him any longer.

Dagon sets his feet on either side of Tadiel and steps a little closer, letting Tadiel's finger move deeper into his mouth. Tadiel licks his lips, flicks his gaze up to Dagon's eyes for a moment and then back down, pushing his finger in a little bit farther.

Dagon lets his lips loosen and keeps his eyes locked on Tadiel's fascinated, flushing face as the second knuckle slides in. He laps at the taste of honey, running his tongue up and down the underside until one of Tadiel's sticky fingertips touches his face, then sucks the finger in his mouth.

Tadiel moans, and Dagon yanks himself away.

"We need a lodging house," Tadiel gasps. Dagon sets his hand to Tadiel's chest, trying to steady himself against Tadiel's throbbing heartbeat.

"Yes. Yes we do."

They rush down the street, Dagon wholly grateful his large breeches hide his erection in a way his old hose and codpiece never could have. They burst into the first public house they find, where a very suspicious innkeeper asks them too many questions. Tadiel tries to look very, very tired and Dagon pours coins into the man's hands, noting how amazing it is that the simple tinkling of gold can quell even the most insistent of worries.

The innkeeper hands them a key, and they make it most of the way down the hall before their steady tread turns too quick, their steps too loud. Tadiel flings the door open and they barrel through. Dagon slams it behind them and locks it, letting the key drop out of his hand and right down onto the floor with a clatter of metal on stone.

Tadiel is already tugging at the strings of his ruff. Dagon grabs his wrists and pulls his hands away, holding them at either side of Tadiel's face

as he backs his lover toward the bed. When Tadiel's legs hit the edge of the bed with a jolt and he quietly gasps, Dagon sets his own hands at the slightly sticky ruff strings and pulls them loose. Tadiel surges forward into a honey-tinged kiss as Dagon tosses the Angel's ruff away and starts at the strings of his own, letting it follow Tadiel's to the floor. He shoves at the Angel's shoulders, throwing him backward to hit the mattress with a swallowed thump. Dagon barely gives him time to bounce before he climbs on top of him, hands already at his chest, pulling open the top three buttons on Tadiel's doublet as Tadiel scrabbles at the buttons toward the bottom, trying to pull himself out of his clothes and rock up into Dagon's body at the same time.

The growl of frustration he lets out when he realizes Dagon is holding himself a little too high for their hips to meet sends a bolt of *want* through Dagon's cock. Tadiel seizes him around the forearms and tries to pull him down, but Dagon pulls his arms free, sits up a little higher on his knees, and presses his hands into Tadiel's stomach, gently holding the Angel down. He waits until the Angel's eyes lock onto his own, then grabs Tadiel's wrist and brings his fingers back to his mouth.

He folds down all but Tadiel's ring finger, then circles the tip of his tongue up around the pad of Tadiel's finger. Tadiel watches in fascination as Dagon lets his tongue wander down to the Angel's knuckles, then all the way down to his palm before returning to Tadiel's fingertip.

With every inch Dagon's tongue traces, Tadiel's hips twitch more desperately, and they rock up hard when Dagon takes the finger back into his mouth, seeking out any trace of honey on his lover's hand. Tadiel gulps and Dagon watches, fascinated at the way Tadiel's muscles work in his throat. For a moment he considers setting his own hand to Tadiel's mouth, to find out what it is about this act his lover finds so arousing. But Dagon's own cock is starting to swell from the sound of other man's breath hitching, and he loves nothing more than the look on Tadiel's face as he rides those hills and valleys on the way to the little death.

They don't do this often enough. Even with the way the tides of history have turned, the way the war is changing, it's still a risk to spend too much time together. They still have duties to perform and Princes of Heaven and Hell to report to. And while they can make time for the occasional

dalliance, it would be ill advised for them to risk drawing more attention to their connection than they already do.

He pulls his mouth from Tadiel's ring finger, watching the way his porcelain cheeks flush to rose.

"Sweet, sweet, sweet," he mutters as he takes his lover's middle and index finger into his mouth and swirls his tongue around them.

Tadiel gasps and tries to rock up again. Dagon's thighs strain as he decides between staying just far enough to make Tadiel even more desperate so it will be that much better when he does grind his hips down into Tadiel's begging body, or getting that friction for himself now. He tries to hold out, wait until Tadiel is really gasping for it, but when Tadiel drops his head back with a breathless "Dagon!", he can't wait.

He sinks onto Tadiel's body, canting his hips down. Beneath him, Tadiel is already achingly hard. His eyes clench shut as Dagon rocks against him, and Dagon shifts on top of him, aligning their cocks.

The bloom of pleasure as they press together, Tadiel's hot, pink mouth hanging open as Dagon sucks around his fingers, is what it takes to get Dagon's mind all the way to what Tadiel, his beautiful, slowly Falling Angel, has clearly already figured out. Dagon nearly drools as he sees it in his mind. Tadiel's thick, pale cock in his mouth, smoother and heavier than his fingers. Making him gasp and shiver harder.

He wonders what it tastes like.

Continuing to lap at his lover's skin, he drops his hands back down to Tadiel's doublet, pulling at the laces until all the pieces are loose enough to come free. Tadiel finally pulls his fingers away and sits up, setting his wet hand to the back of Dagon's neck and pulling him into a kiss before his hand drops away.

The kiss gets sloppy and uneven as Tadiel tries to fight his way out of his loosened clothes. Dagon instantly takes back his appreciation of human fashion. He breaks the kiss, helps Tadiel undress, and then works his way out of his own doublet while Tadiel wriggles out of his breeches.

Dagon watches as Tadiel strips himself down, throwing clothes over the edge of the bed like a sailor bailing water out of a boat. He drops back onto his bare ass and crosses his legs in front of himself as Dagon finally gets out of his clothes.

Tadiel surges forward as the last of Dagon's bare skin comes into view, pooling himself into Dagon's lap and diving to his mouth.

"You are so beautiful," he whispers to Dagon, like it's a secret. "Every time I've left you, I think I'm imagining you more beautiful than you must really be, but then, when I see you again, you're even more than I remembered."

Dagon doesn't trust himself to reply. Tadiel gets expressive and insistent when they're like this, bare and pressed into each other, but Dagon's mind is more likely to stall out at all the ways he wants to touch Tadiel before they reach completion, and right now his mind is wholly occupied by the feeling of the slight wetness at the tip of Tadiel's cock sliding against his stomach, how much larger it is than Tadiel's fingers, and whether he can ever hope to fit it into his mouth.

"I do not get to touch you as much as I would like," Dagon manages to respond. Tadiel pushes forward and kisses him, working the kiss deep and wide before slipping his hand between them and taking both their cocks together in his familiar grip. But Dagon won't let himself be distracted. He dives forward, knocking Tadiel down against the pillows like they're playing ninepins, and Tadiel laughs happily into his neck, kissing along his tendon, down to his shoulder, and biting gently. Dagon jerks up into his hand with a cut-off moan. They've learned each other well.

And tonight he wants to explore further. He lifts up, pulling himself out of Tadiel's grip, and starts kissing down the line of Tadiel's chin, over the spot underneath his ear, simply to feel him jump and hear him moan, then continues down, farther than he usually would, down the lean muscles of Tadiel's chest. He nips at Tadiel's last rib. Tadiel gasps.

"Dagon, you do—"

"I want to try this. So badly, Tadiel."

"Dagon, can we… I mean… ahh." Tadiel's request is lost as Dagon drags his teeth along the line of the Angel's rib again.

"We can do anything, sweet," Dagon replies, kissing along Tadiel's stomach, coming to the line of dark hair that springs up under his navel.

"You're certain?"

"Anything," Dagon replies, letting that line of hair tickle against his clean-shaven chin. Tadiel sighs, and his body rocks a little from side to side

under Dagon's mouth as Dagon returns to kissing the skin underneath Tadiel's ribs, looking for another spot that brings Tadiel to make noise.

Dagon feels a shock of soft feathers against his back and jolts up. The feathers stay tight around his back, almost in an embrace.

Tadiel, framed by broad, shining white wings, looks concerned at his shock. "Is this not all right?"

Dagon shakes his head, then lifts a hand from the mattress, letting it graze over the down inside Tadiel's wings. Tadiel brings his bottom lip into his mouth, his eyes dropping shut when Dagon touches him there, as though it's surprisingly pleasurable.

"No… it's fine. They're… you're very beautiful. I haven't… I haven't seen you as you are for a very long time." He lets his fingers glide through Tadiel's feathers again, eliciting that same tightly reined-in reaction.

"Nor I," Tadiel breathes. "Dagon? Would you let me see yours?"

Dagon shivers. He can hear an echo of Tadiel, from years ago, telling him he looked monstrous.

"I don't know."

"Please?" Tadiel asks, wrapping his wings tighter around Dagon's back, brushing the edges of them along Dagon's shoulder blades, where the joints, the joints by which Tadiel had once grabbed him and cast him from Heaven, would be were his wings to manifest. Desire sparks in him again at the touch, and he arches back into it.

"Tadiel… I don't… look like you," Dagon says finally. "I am changed since my time in Heaven."

"I have seen your wings as they are now, Dagon," Tadiel says, setting his hands to Dagon's shoulders. "I know they aren't like mine. I am not repulsed." He sets a kiss to Dagon's lips. "Please. Let me see all of you."

"Tadiel." Dagon tries to resist, knowing he can't refuse Tadiel anything for long. "My wings will show you what I am."

"You're a Demon, Dagon. I am aware."

"When I'm with you… I feel like I may not be," Dagon replies.

Tadiel's eyes turn soft. "All right."

“But leave yours out.” Dagon sighs, settling his hands in the feathers for a moment more. “While I….”

“While you what?”

Dagon smiles, kisses him, then starts back down his body, pressing quick kiss after quick kiss until he finds his last mark. “While I try something new.”

Dagon nuzzles down Tadiel’s stomach and lets his tongue drop into the groove between Tadiel’s hipbone and the soft skin of his groin. He lifts his head, just enough to look into Tadiel’s face. Tadiel’s eyes are heavy with lust, his bottom lip creeping back into his mouth.

Dagon licks another stripe up his skin. He can see the way Tadiel’s jaw goes slack and he sets another kiss a little lower, low enough for his chin to brush against Tadiel’s balls.

Tadiel sucks in a long breath, and Dagon feels a rush of air around his body as Tadiel’s wings come forward, wrapping around him again. Tadiel’s eyebrows rise slightly, as though asking permission, and Dagon nods, shivering as the smooth feathers of Tadiel’s wings slide over his back. He raises his own eyebrow in the same way and Tadiel nods back, a quick, sharp bob of his head.

Dagon shifts down the bed and settles between the Angel’s legs, tucking his lover’s cock up against his stomach before ducking down and licking a stripe up the underside. He’s surprised at how the skin that feels so silken under his palm feels even softer under his tongue. Tadiel groans as his tongue reaches the tip, and Dagon shudders at the way Tadiel presses his wings tighter to his skin when he traces under the head, feeling its soft, full weight against his tongue.

The taste of his skin here isn’t much different from the taste of the skin on his fingers. With the honey still lingering in Dagon’s mouth, the slight sweetness remains.

Dagon flattens his tongue and travels back down, then looks up to Tadiel’s face to make sure he’s watching. Dagon sets the tip of his tongue to the base of the Angel’s cock and traces his way up the fat vein in the center, grinning to himself as Tadiel’s body starts to shake underneath his attentions.

He flattens his tongue as he reaches the tip and brushes it over the head, catching a hint of the wetness at the slit, a flavor he can't quite place but that makes him salivate for more.

His own cock throbs at the way Tadiel cries out, and Dagon drops his hips to the mattress, rutting down only enough to alleviate the agony and focus on the ecstasy. Tadiel's feathers tickle against his ass and the backs of his legs as he rocks down.

He wraps his arms around Tadiel's hips, setting his palms on top of Tadiel's stomach, fingertips touching, and places his lips at the side of Tadiel's cock this time, tracing up to see if he can coax out a new sound or reaction.

He does.

His Angel's arms spasm down. His hands circle around Dagon's forearms. Dagon takes the touch as encouragement and this time, as he reaches the end of Tadiel's length on his journey up, he takes the tip of Tadiel's cock between his lips. He drops his hands to the mattress and props his chest up, then cautiously sinks his mouth down, adjusting his jaw around the girth of Tadiel, trying to find the best way to keep his teeth from the sensitive flesh.

The array of complications is dizzying for a few moments as Dagon fits his lips around the Angel, but the groan ripping from his lover's throat as Dagon envelopes him is reward enough.

Dagon inches down, further acquainting himself with the way his lips stretch and his throat opens to take Tadiel in, to wet more of his velvet skin. He works his way back up, letting Tadiel's cock spring out of his mouth. He glances back up at Tadiel's face and moans at the expression there.

Tadiel's eyes are blown wide, the sharp green barely visible around the black discs of his pupils. His mouth is hanging open, the dark red inside peeking through his pale-pink lips. His cheeks are rosy. A lock of his dark hair has fallen across his forehead.

He looks wild.

"More?" Dagon breathes.

Tadiel's Adam's apple bobs, then his head, and Dagon returns to his task, sinking to the midpoint of Tadiel's shaft all at once this time and adjusting his position on the bed again so he has room to pump his mouth

up and down the shaft. Listening to Tadiel gasp and stammer underneath him, Dagon seriously considers the merits of risking the wrath of Hell to rebel again if only to spend all the hours of his immortality finding new ways to touch Tadiel. He works down farther, thrilling when he realizes he's already able to take in more of the Angel's cock than before.

Tadiel's hips are shaking underneath his hands now, like pottery in an earthquake threatening to topple off the shelf. The Angel's hands slide farther up his arms and wring over his biceps, sparking an idea in Dagon's mind. He glides his palm over Tadiel's slim hip and circles it around his cock, enclosing the flesh his mouth can't reach quite yet.

Tadiel's hips jerk up against the arm Dagon has sprawled over his lover's hips. Dagon holds him down, but the desperate move spikes his desire even higher. He grinds his cock helplessly into the mattress. It has too much give to offer him any relief.

Tadiel is gasping, his hips bobbing up in miniscule motions as he struggles to hold still. Inspired, Dagon hollows his cheeks as he moves downward again. Tadiel cries out and bucks up against his arm again. Dagon can feel the way his stomach muscles clench under his forearm as his lover arches backward. Tadiel's hands dig into his shoulders. His wings shudder away from, then slap back against, Dagon's back.

"Da… Dagon?" Tadiel fights out, his voice breathy and graveled.

Dagon "mmms" in response, eliciting another cry from Tadiel, another spasm in his hips. He does it again, feeling the vibration echo through the hand he has wrapped around Tadiel's shaft as he pumps over the skin.

"Would you… ahh!"

Dagon grins around Tadiel's cock at the sharp response a twist of the wrist earns him.

"Look at me." Tadiel gulps. "While you… look at me, Dagon, please."

Tadiel's fingers wrap into the hair at the nape of Dagon's neck, and Dagon allows his face to be pulled up. He locks his eyes to Tadiel's before sucking his cock in until his lips meet the hand ringing the base. Tadiel's head rocks back, then snaps forward again, as though he can't bear to miss anything. Dagon keeps watching him from under his eyelashes. The way Tadiel's eyes close and pop back open when he sucks a little harder. The way he bites his bottom lip when Dagon grips tighter.

“Uh… uh… uh….” The mangled noise from Tadiel’s throat as his hips stutter under Dagon’s arm and mouth is sweet and familiar. Dagon’s cock leaps in recognition. He works his hips down into the mattress and moans at the frustration the barely there touch causes.

The vibration makes Tadiel go suddenly rigid and clench his eyes shut. Dagon scarcely has time to brace himself before his mouth floods. The taste is thicker, heavier than the hint of flavor he’d tasted at the first rock of Tadiel’s hips. It reminds him of the ocean, and he swallows it, lapping every trace from Tadiel’s skin as the Angel shudders underneath him.

Tadiel slips a hand under his chin, pulling him away from his search for those last few drops. His wings cup around Dagon’s back, urging him upward. Dagon rises to his knees and falls onto Tadiel’s body, rutting hard into the Angel’s skin as Tadiel’s arms and wings wrap tight around him, pulling him in hard.

Tadiel pants hot breath into Dagon’s hair as they writhe together, slowing when they both feel Dagon spill between them. Dagon drops his forehead over Tadiel’s shoulder as he feels the last of his seed wring from his body and tries to catch his breath as Tadiel’s wings soothe against his back, warm and incredibly soft. Dagon’s not sure if the feel of them makes him sad or jealous. He presses up against the broad, strong muscles under the soft surface and sets his lips to Tadiel’s, falling into the recovering Angel’s kiss.

Tadiel makes a sound of soft surprise, and Dagon’s cock makes a halfhearted attempt to harden again when he realizes why—Tadiel can taste himself in Dagon’s mouth. The Angel’s hands run over the small of Dagon’s back, then up his spine, fingertips rushing across his shoulder blades. Dagon makes a decision.

“Tadiel?” he whispers.

“Yes?”

“Move your hands away.”

“Why?”

“Because I trust you,” Dagon says, the actual truth pouring from his mouth before he can offer anything else.

Tadiel doesn't respond at first, but then his hands fall away and he lifts his wings from Dagon's skin. Dagon buries his face into the crook of the Angel's neck, breathes deep, and manifests his wings.

He shivers with worry as he feels the warmth of Tadiel's wings move away, and when Tadiel's fingertips slowly brush over the tops of Dagon's wings. Dagon shudders at the touch.

They are grotesque. The last burnt clumps of feathers have long since molted away. The black skin has changed, barely skin anymore, but some dry, rough surface that feels as though it might crumble like chalk and fall away under Tadiel's hands.

The Angel's careful exploration pauses as he reaches the upper edge and realizes, unlike his own wings, unlike the wings Dagon used to have, Dagon's wings are now strung between several spindly bones, like a bat's.

Tadiel brushes his fingers back and forth for a moment over the hardness of the bone cresting Dagon's wings. Dagon spreads them out a little, so that Tadiel can feel how the joint splinters out through the planes of his skin. The flat of Tadiel's palm glides over the top joint, dipping down between two of the bones into the flap of skin between them.

Dagon's heart is stammering under Tadiel's hesitant exploration, until finally Tadiel whispers, "Oh, Dagon," in a small, tearful voice. Dagon tucks his face closer to Tadiel's neck, gulping in his lover's heavy scent, feeling the sweat cool against his forehead.

Tadiel sets his hand to the back of Dagon's neck and sweeps down. Dagon gasps in shock when Tadiel cups each of his hands around the joints of Dagon's wings.

"Oh, Dagon… I…." Dagon feels Tadiel's head shift over as he tries to press a kiss to Dagon's cheek with the corner of his mouth. "Dagon, Dagon."

Dagon shrinks down into him. He knows. He knows they're disgusting and repulsive.

"Dagon, I'm so sorry," Tadiel breathes. He runs his palms along the joints again, in echo of a long-ago action, then back underneath them, pulling one wing up over Dagon's shoulder and pressing a featherlight kiss to the rough skin stretched over the bone.

“Dagon, I am so very sorry. Please… please forgive me,” Tadiel whispers.

Dagon shivers. Thousands of years have gone by and he’s held that hurt close, but a kiss and a question and he can feel the burden lift from his heart. He lays a kiss against Tadiel’s neck, hoists himself up, and kisses Tadiel, thrilling when Tadiel slides his hands down over Dagon’s wings as he kisses back.

“I forgive you,” Dagon tells him.

The kiss goes wider and deeper. Tadiel rolls Dagon onto his back and lets Dagon wrap his wings over Tadiel’s as the kiss turns back to rutting. They stay wrapped around each other, sticky and sated with the lone blanket tossed over them, long after all other noises in the inn have died down, discussing the dull goings-on of Heaven and the few occurrences in Hell which can be discussed.

“What do you think will happen, afterward?” Dagon asks.

“After what?”

“The Great War,” Dagon clarifies.

“Heaven on Earth, they say. Or, I suppose, Hell.”

“And after that?”

“What do you mean?” Tadiel’s jaw cracks as he yawns, and Dagon smiles. They don’t have to sleep, but they can if they try. He’s done it a few times. It’s pleasant. But he’s never yawned.

“Hell exists to harden souls to war against Heaven. Heaven exists to fight Hell and humiliate Lucifer for his rebellion. Neither has reason to exist without the other. And what will happen to the humans? They won’t all remain Godly because Heaven wins.”

“I don’t ask enough questions, do I?” Tadiel asks quietly.

“I don’t know,” Dagon replies. “Maybe not. But one of us is still an Angel and one isn’t.” He combs his hands through Tadiel’s feathers. “And which of us asked questions?”

“What do you think will happen?”

“If Heaven wins?”

“Yes.”

“The last few thousand years over again. Someone will rise in the crater Lucifer leaves. Hell created again. The war waged over again from the first scene to the same end.”

“And Hell?” Tadiel asks. His fingers are in Dagon’s hair, and Dagon rolls closer to the touch, tucking his wings a little closer against his back.

“Just… more Hell.” Dagon sighs. “Maybe someone would rise against Lucifer.”

“Do you think anyone would?”

“We’re already Demons,” Dagon answers. “How much farther is there to Fall?”

It’s not an answer, but Tadiel doesn’t push any further.

“Dagon?” Tadiel asks again, after a long few moments have passed.

“Yes, Tadiel?”

“What will happen if we are found out?”

He hasn’t asked Dagon’s opinion, he’s asked for the truth. Dagon wonders if Tadiel’s forgotten Dagon has to give it to him.

“We’ll be killed.”

Tadiel’s fingers don’t stop their gentle movement in Dagon’s hair. “Yes. We will be, won’t we?” he murmurs.

“What would happen to us if we were killed?” Dagon asks, settling his face tighter to Tadiel’s chest. He could probably sleep if he made the effort. “Afterward?”

Tadiel’s hand stops.

“Nothing. We would just stop.”

TADIEL shivers in the chill night breeze, listening for any sound over the susurration of the wind in the leaves, carrying the scent of the last wildflowers of the season in its fall chill. The clearing is different from the heavenly gardens but, Tadiel is forced to admit, much more beautiful. Heaven doesn’t have the crisp smell of dying leaves or the sounds of the wind, or the sleepy hooting of the owls. Or the dark. Or the moonlight.

The more time Tadiel spends on Earth, the more he feels Heaven lacking. It's like being in a painting: beautiful, but static. Suffused with Divine Love, but without any sort of passion.

And that is his most pressing problem. He is an Angel, and he is starting to *prefer* Earth. He is questioning things, and worse, he is starting to feel justified in his questioning. He won't rebel, not when the other option is Hell, not when he knows Heaven has had a hand in miracles as well as atrocities, and not when he feels like he alone, an Angel tainted if not Fallen, wants to make things *better* for humanity on Earth, not only in Heaven.

But he doesn't know if he can remain an Angel when he feels this much doubt.

"Moonlight suits you."

Tadiel can hear the smile in the voice behind him. He turns to see Dagon leaning against a tree, slightly ridiculous in his conservative Puritan clothes.

"The New World does not suit you," Tadiel replies.

Dagon plucks at his jacket with evident distaste. "No. Damned vicious crows determined to hate their lives and dress for their caskets in this part of the world. It's worse than the Dark Ages." He sighs and shrugs himself up away from the tree. "But they are my flock, and I must go where the sinners are."

He comes toward Tadiel and wraps his arms around his waist. Tadiel is surprised at the little spring of relief he feels in his heart when their lips touch. It's only been fifty years since they were last together. Dagon presses forward, deepening the kiss, and Tadiel tastes something odd and strong in the kiss. Sweet and… breadlike? He touches his tongue to Dagon's, trying to remember the taste as he reacquaints himself with the feel of Dagon's mouth against his.

He realizes what the taste is at the same moment Dagon slips a hand between his legs and huffs, "I could take you right here."

Tadiel pushes Dagon back gently as the Demon sets his lips to the spot on his neck that has been proven to make his mind stop.

"You taste like beer," Tadiel tells him.

Dagon smiles. “The beer is the only thing on this side of the world that is not distasteful.”

“Are you able to become drunk?” Tadiel asks, honestly curious.

“I have given it an honest effort,” Dagon replies. He leans away, hands still at Tadiel’s waist, thumb running over the ugly wool of Tadiel’s jacket. “You’ve been in the town today?”

“Yes. It’s insanity,” Tadiel replies. “They’re trying women and children—faithful women and children—for imaginary crimes. The souls in this town are righteous, and there is no Demonic activity but yours.”

“Do you think I’ve done this?” Dagon asks. He doesn’t sound offended as much as surprised.

“No,” Tadiel replies. “It’s not… in line with your usual habits. And you just said you’ve spent the day sampling all that is good in the New World.” Tadiel gives him a hint of a smile, warming when Dagon echoes it lopsidedly. “It’s just… humans again. Isn’t it?”

“Goaded to evil by righteousness? Sounds human to me,” Dagon says. He inches back toward Tadiel. Tadiel allows it. “I’ve been here for days, and I haven’t lifted a finger that didn’t have a mug in it. There’s nothing I can do to make it worse.”

“Nor I to make it better.”

“You could manifest at the next trial,” Dagon suggests. “I’d love to see it. You spreading your wings wide at the next shout of ‘I saw Goody Whatsit with the Devil.’ As though Lucifer would ever deign to manifest to humans.”

“Wouldn’t have to be Lucifer himself. Any Demon would do. How would they know the difference?”

“True. But there’s been nothing. I was sent to cause trouble, and trouble was already here. Why were you sent?”

“I wasn’t,” Tadiel replies. He sets his hand to Dagon’s high, stiff collar and carefully twists a button open. “There has, after all, been no Demonic activity. These people are, apparently, secure in God’s will. I can’t stop them. Leave them to their madness. I”—he pops another button open—“came for you.”

Tadiel leans forward into another beer-flavored kiss.

“That doesn’t sound like you, sweet.”

“The souls of the self-righteous can’t be saved.” Tadiel sighs, pulling Dagon’s ugly hat off and tossing it out into the meadow. “I’ll ferry the victims to Heaven and leave the souls of their accusers to languish in whatever undiscovered country unclaimed souls journey to. Serve them right.”

Dagon slips out of the kiss, and Tadiel digs his fingers into the Demon’s arm to brace himself when Dagon runs his lips up Tadiel’s neck, his tongue darting out over the spot for a second before Tadiel feels his hot breath at his ear.

“Let me serve you right, Tadiel?” Dagon whispers, chuckling as he presses forward into Tadiel’s body, knocking him back against the skinny tree he had been leaning against when he appeared. Tadiel can feel the Demon already hard against his hip. He marvels at how desperate he is already when it’s hardly been any time at all since he last felt Dagon’s lips around him.

“If you insist,” Tadiel replies, laughing when Dagon falls to his knees, pulling Tadiel’s hips to his face and nosing between his legs. Tadiel runs a hand through Dagon’s shock of blond hair, chuckling at the eager way Dagon digs at the closures of Tadiel's trousers. He sighs and drops his head back against the tree.

Shock at what he sees closes his throat.

Behind Dagon, twirling Dagon’s hat between his long, claw-like fingers, is another Demon. Stubby, black, bony wings held out, horns sprouting from his misshapen humanlike face, lips twisted up into a grin. Tadiel freezes, barely aware of Dagon’s hand slipping into his trousers. It’s been centuries since he’s seen a human-made Demon.

Tadiel drops his hands to Dagon’s shoulders and shoves him away as the Demon winks and burns the hat between his hands.

Tadiel throws up a hand to blast the creature away. At the same moment, Dagon cries out his name, seizes him around the legs, and throws him down to the ground.

The air above them sizzles, and a roar rings out from the Demon. Tadiel rolls onto his stomach, casts a glance toward where the Demon was,

and sees nothing but large black flakes of ash falling out of the air against the moonlight.

"*Tadiel*!" An enraged scream quakes in the air from the other side of the clearing. Beside him, Dagon heaves himself up from the ground, and another ball of fire and brimstone erupts from his hands. Tadiel pulls himself up in time to see Jophiel storming toward them, singed but unimpeded.

"Tadiel, you filthy—"

Dagon tosses another fireball toward Jophiel, who bats it out of the way, arm cutting straight through it.

"Lustful—"

He's still sprawled helpless in the grass next to Dagon as Jophiel bears down on them. Two more fireballs rocket toward the enraged Angel from either side of the clearing, missing him by scant inches and flying over Tadiel and Dagon's heads. Tadiel feels the scathing heat wash over him as Jophiel continues to march toward them, his sword ready at his side.

"More Demons," Dagon groans. Tadiel quickly scans the trees for them, but sees nothing.

"Treasonous—" Jophiel continues as he storms toward them.

Dagon tosses another fireball at Jophiel. He sweeps it away with his sword, sending it soaring into the woods, where a Demon's shout echoes over the clearing as the fireball blazes just before the tree line.

"*Despicable* worm!" Jophiel roars, lunging toward Tadiel. Tadiel twists out of the way. Jophiel adjusts midthrust and brings the sword down toward Dagon instead. Tadiel cries out, but Dagon rolls out of the way and springs up, running into the woods in the direction of the incoming fireballs. Jophiel roars as he plunges his sword into the ground. Tadiel launches himself to his feet, but Jophiel pulls the sword back before Tadiel can reach it, and now he's weaponless and attempting to square off against one of Heaven's warriors. While Dagon races to stop anyone who may report back to Hell, Tadiel must erase the only witness of Heaven.

"Whoring around with a Demon," Jophiel snarls. "I shouldn't even have to kill you. If you had any decency you'd spit yourself on my sword out of shame!"

He thrusts at Tadiel who only just manages to spin out of the blade's path as another fireball rockets across the clearing and strikes Jophiel, bearing him down to the ground with a scream. His sword falls from his hand.

Tadiel takes his split-second advantage. He grabs the sword from the ground, and buries it in the wrathful Angel's throat, lancing all the way through him until he feels the blade thrust into the dirt beneath Jophiel's neck.

The clearing is suddenly silent. Tadiel watches Jophiel's face as his would-be killer's expression turns from rage, to shock, and then for a moment, betrayal, before his body erupts in a plume of white fire, blue snapping and crackling along the edges of it.

Tadiel leaps back. He's never seen the death of an Angel on Earth before. The flames explode outward from Jophiel's body, while the body itself seems to contract into a ball of light that burns so bright Tadiel has to look away for a moment.

When he forces himself to turn back, the light is dying, like a candle under a jar slowly ceasing to burn before finally flickering out.

Jophiel's expression is preserved in white ash for a moment before it crumbles. Tadiel realizes what he's done and his knees give slowly, until he's kneeling next to the pile, watching as the fresh fall breeze carries it away flake by flake.

At edge of hearing, there is a cackling noise. It stops suddenly. Tadiel tears his eyes from the disappearing body and sees Dagon walking back into the clearing. He's dragging something behind him. As he gets closer Tadiel can see that it's the body of another lesser Demon. Dagon drops it a few feet from the remains of Jophiel and tosses something on it. Tadiel's stomach lurches when he realizes that it's a severed wing. Then Dagon marches toward Tadiel, grabs the hilt of the sword still jutting out of the ground, and pulls it free.

"Tadiel?" Dagon says. "Are you hurt?"

"No," Tadiel manages with a shake of his head.

"Hurry, we need to cover our tracks." He tucks his hand under Tadiel's arm and helps him to his feet. "The corruptions were sent to check up on me. Because I was assigned here and have done no magic. One of them saw

us together, and so the others converged; that many Demons together would have caught Heaven's attention—thus Jophiel. We need to cover our tracks just in case."

He points the sword toward the pile of black ash where they had seen the first Demon. "Jophiel killed this Demon, and the one dead on the far side of the clearing could have died in any manner, it's not important." He waves the sword in his hand. "I killed Jophiel. And you killed this last one."

Tadiel nods. "Yes."

Dagon looks at him expectantly. "Tadiel? Burn the body."

"Right." Tadiel raises a hand and lets forth his own fireball, white like holy fire instead of Dagon's red and orange burst of Demon flame.

"You killed all of the Demons?" Tadiel asks as the fire smolders out.

"Yes. There are no witnesses. We're fine." It's hard to tell from his tone which of them Dagon is trying to reassure.

A cry goes up from the other side of the clearing. Tadiel flinches, but Dagon nods at him, and Tadiel makes himself invisible, Dagon presumably following suit.

"No! No! I saw them!" A young girl's shriek goes up in the clearing. "They were here in a flash of fire and light! An Angel, an honest Angel—sword flaming and wings white—there stood he and smote the Demons—look you—no! Take me not in hand, look! There! Where the ash yet lies! Look you!"

Tadiel sees her as they approach. A young girl, fifteen maybe, marriageable age, but probably unmarried, stands between a collection of dour town elders. A woman, perhaps her mother, is with her. For decency's sake, Tadiel remembers.

Or maybe safety, judging from the hard expressions on the men's faces.

"And why, Miss Whempert, had you come to this meadow where Goodie Clammer and the three Morton girls turned from God and embraced sin?" the oldest man asks, with a voice like dusty books.

"I saw the light from my windows, and I thought to glimpse the terror what afflicts our home. And, having knowledge of it, report to the learned reverend, that he may exorcise it and save more of our neighbors from Hattie Morton's fate!"

“So you thought to come to this accursed field alone to consort with Demons. You confess?”

Tadiel steps closer to Dagon. “Perhaps I should—”

“What?” Dagon hisses. “Set things straight? Think of what she’s seen you do. She saw you kill an Angel, and those men have clearly made their minds up already. Appear now and they’ll kill her for summoning a Demon.”

Tadiel shrinks. Dagon’s right. His behavior has hardly been Angelic these last couple of centuries, and if he needed any further proof of that, he can simply remember he just killed a former compatriot, not only to protect his Fallen lover, but also to hide his treachery from Heaven.

And watching the way the men look at this poor girl, whose goodness nearly radiates out of her, he’s not sure he should even be ashamed.

“I came to this field to protect my family and friends.”

“And saw Demons?”

The girl, who had been hunched over, arm outthrown, pointing out toward the seeming empty field, drops her hand and stands up straight, pulling her shawl tighter around her shoulders.

“How long was it to be before you tried me?” she demands, her voice low and firm. “Did you wait until we came here, or were you piling kindling in your dreams before I had roused you from your beds?”

“Ruth!” Her mother gasps and reaches out for the girl’s arm. Ruth’s only movement is to lift her chin a little higher.

“She doesn’t mean it, elders,” the mother says, obviously desperate. “She’s not been herself since we lost the Mortons. ’Twas tragic and hardship for us all.”

The youngest of the three men steps toward the mother, and the other two flank Ruth as he edges the mother away from the girl.

“We understand, Goodwife Whempert” he says. His falsely soothing tone grates against Tadiel’s nerves. “And you are correct. She has not been herself.”

The men seize Ruth around the arms. The girl doesn’t even flinch as they begin to drag her away. Her mother screams, and the youngest man claps his hand around her mouth.

“Get you back to bed, Goodwife. Before the curse of this field is settled upon your whole house.”

He pulls his hand away. Ruth is already out of the Angel’s sight. Her mother turns and runs in the opposite direction.

“It’s days like this I’m glad I rebelled.” Dagon sighs beside him. Tadiel grits his teeth and turns to his lover.

“I killed an Angel,” he whispers.

Dagon looks at him sadly and pulls Tadiel’s forehead to his own. “But you saved us.” He strokes his hand soothingly over the back of Tadiel’s head. “And were you to see another Angel on Earth being true to his heart instead of to his orders, you would show compassion. Yes?”

Tadiel nods against Dagon’s forehead, wishing he could be as blasé as his lover about this.

Tadiel leans in to kiss Dagon. “Some days, I am so sick of eternity,” he sighs against Dagon’s lips.

“Tonight we should be vigilant. I should do my duty to Hell. You should depart.”

Tadiel nods. Dagon is right. They can’t be together tonight. Not when Heaven and Hell might be checking in after the battle that just took place.

“I cannot leave without doing some good for the girl,” he says.

“Yes,” Dagon agrees. “She will wield a sword in Heaven, and the armies of Hell will quail at her feet.” He chuckles morosely.

“I’ll watch over her cell, perhaps give her some comfort.”

Dagon kisses him again. “You’re too good for Heaven, sweet. Go watch over the lamb.”

“The next time we are on Earth together, come for me. Please, Dagon?”

“I’d storm back into Heaven to lie with you, if my wings could still carry me that high.”

Tadiel feels the familiar stab of guilt at that, and sees Dagon’s face go stark as he realizes the full meaning of his words.

“Tadiel, I meant no—”

Tadiel shrugs and squeezes his hands around Dagon's hips. "I know. It's passed."

"It's forgiven," Dagon adds carefully.

"Yes." He tries to pull away from Dagon but feels as though his hands are latched to the Demon, like a lock on a door.

"Tadiel?"

"I must go," Tadiel says. He doesn't sound convinced, even to his own ears. "We'll meet again."

"I'll count the days," Dagon replies, pulling him in for one more kiss. Tadiel pushes him away when he tries to deepen it, and Dagon gives him a sad smile before spiriting away with a burst of black smoke, leaving Tadiel to collect himself in the empty field for a moment before transporting himself to the town hall.

He watches as the girl, Ruth, still silent and rigid in her persecutor's arms, is thrown into a cell and the door is locked behind her.

"You'll be brought to trial in the morning," the oldest man tells her.

"I will pray," Ruth snaps back.

His expression twists under Ruth's glower and he storms out, his footsteps sharp against the hard-packed dirt floor.

Tadiel watches silently as Ruth waits for the door to close. She huffs out a breath as the sound of the door latching rings out into the room and settles herself against the wall, pulling her knees to her chest. She drops her forehead onto them.

"Our father, who art in Heaven," she begins.

Tadiel dithers. It is not explicitly forbidden for Angels to appear to humans. Most Angels only make themselves known to humans with a feeling of warmth or by a ball of light, but fully manifesting, unless dictated by Metatron to do so, is very strongly discouraged.

Tadiel holds his wings out, lets his clothes become a human approximation of his heavenly robes, and makes himself visible.

"Ruth?"

The girl goes rigid for a moment, then flings her head up defiantly. Her eyes widen momentarily when she sees him, but she recovers with admirable speed.

“Hello. My name is Tadiel.”

“I saw you battle in the field,” Ruth tells him. Her knees tuck tighter to her body. “You killed the Angel with the sword.”

Tadiel sighs and crouches so he’s face-to-face with the girl. It’s not very Angelic, but neither is he. Not anymore.

“It’s very complicated. You know, do you not, of the war to come between Heaven and Hell?”

“I have read my Bible,” Ruth replies. “Revelation.”

“Yes. Well. That war is ongoing. Angels”—he places a hand on his chest, and it feels a little defensive—“like me… we’re fighting it even now.”

“And the one with the black wings?”

“That’s even more complicated.”

“I would think so.” She purses her lips, as though holding an opinion back with great effort.

“There were Demons in the woods tonight. But they were after us and us only. There is no witchcraft here. No Demons appeared to your friends. They did not turn away from God. There is nothing here but humans and paranoia.”

“You’ve forgotten greed and the lust for power,” Ruth responds. “The Mortons’ crops have been claimed by a distant relation who can see the Demons you claim are not here.”

Tadiel takes in the hard set of her jaw. It brings him comfort that she will lead in Heaven. He hopes she will feel the same.

“In the morning, if you are found guilty, I will take your soul to Heaven,” Tadiel pledges.

The girl looks away from him, letting her knees fall farther away from her body. She adjusts her shawl again. “And in Heaven, will I be part of this coming war?”

“Yes.”

She flicks her eyes back to him. “Good. Because, Lord, it seems to me that Heaven must be losing.”

Kings and soldiers haven't even talked to him like that. Tadiel, too shocked to reply, simply disappears. The girl drops her head back against the wall of her cell and blows out a long breath, then raises herself to her feet and peers out the window.

Under the light of a single lantern, a group of men is already stacking kindling around a charred post in the town square.

"HIDEOUS, aren't they?" Dagon sighs, rubbing his hand over Tadiel's come-slicked stomach. He scoops the Angel back toward him, and Tadiel's wings disappear before he drops back onto Dagon's chest, his warm, sweaty hair tucked under Dagon's nose and smelling like wet hay in a field.

"You're being very dramatic about this," Tadiel scolds him halfheartedly. He fits his hand into Dagon's and Dagon brings their twined hands up to brush his lips over Tadiel's fingers.

"Well, I'm very upset about it." He sighs. "Shiny braid. Grotesque color. The wig, Tadiel." He sets his lips to Tadiel's temple. "The fucking wig."

"The wig is terrible," Tadiel allows, pressing an apologetic kiss to Dagon's neck.

Considering he hasn't actually been wearing clothes for hours, this may not be the most logical time for Dagon to be complaining about them, but they haven't done this in so long: lain together, naked and comfortable, and he doesn't feel any need to censor what comes out of his mouth.

They've been in this hotel room all afternoon. Ever since he appeared at Tadiel's side as he stood at the outskirts of a street riot, watching. The Angel had grabbed Dagon and dragged him off to the hotel he had already picked out. They had fallen into bed, still fully clothed, and come together before they had even gotten out of their overcoats. Dagon had peeled Tadiel out of the offending garments and thrown them onto a chair to lay utterly forgotten while Dagon sucked Tadiel until he screamed.

Tadiel had responded by rolling him onto his back, kissing him, and rubbing against him until he got hard again, then returning the favor. Dagon had nearly exploded down the Angel's throat when Tadiel surprised him with how deep he could take him now.

And now Dagon is ready for a small break, preferably with some refreshment. Which would mean slipping back into his hideous clothes.

“What happened to ruffs and doublets?” he demands. “They were dignified. Attractive.”

“They didn’t make you look like a poodle putting on airs,” Tadiel says, and Dagon could almost swear he’s teasing. “The expedient solution, of course, would be not to dress as an aristocrat, which, considering the current political climate, might be the safest option.”

“Humans can’t hurt me.”

“But you’d have to use more magic than we should risk in your escape, and we’re here to hide away. If you are attacked and have to magic yourself away, then we will have to separate. And then you won’t be here to touch me.” Tadiel turns in his arms, angling up for a kiss. “And the dress of the sans-culottes is very handsome.”

Dagon laughs, feeling warm in his heart as he pulls away from Tadiel’s kiss to whisper, “Imagine. *You* with a lust for Revolutionaries.” He wraps an arm around Tadiel and rolls him onto his back. Tadiel’s muscles are orgasm-relaxed and his body is pliant under Dagon as he brings their mouths together.

There is something decadently escapist about holing up in a nice Parisian hotel while paranoia and fits of overzealous nationalism explode around them, but Dagon, particularly after the last few hundred years, feels like they *deserve* this. They can’t pick souls off the shore like stones and driftwood anymore. More souls than ever are devoted to earthly concerns. Days spent soul hunting have turned to weeks, and those weeks are only getting duller and more lonely.

And a Revolution clearly on the brink of turning bloody is as good a place as any to spend a week alleviating boredom and isolation and still look like they are working. The circumstances are the same as they were in the Plague, the Inquisition, and the so-called Witch Trials, but Dagon is starting to think Heaven and Hell don’t realize how greatly humanity’s allegiances—what they think when they die, and what they are willing to give up their souls for—have changed.

And he feels damn lucky Hell doesn’t know where his allegiances lie now.

Tadiel's fingers spear into the sweat-damp hair at the nape of his neck, pulling him further into a lazy kiss. His skin tingles under Tadiel's palms as the Angel smoothes them over Dagon's back and then down his arms, holding him gently around the elbows.

"I could kiss you like this forever," Tadiel murmurs.

"Really? Because I could be persuaded to seek some lunch."

Tadiel snorts and shoves him away playfully. Dagon pretends to be thrown away and rolls back off Tadiel, collapsing next to him.

"Well, you've convinced me." Tadiel sighs, heaving himself out of bed and going over to the basin on the bedstand. He takes a cloth out of it and begins wiping himself over quickly and efficiently. He dips the second cloth in the water, wrings it out, and tosses it to Dagon.

"But whatever shall you wear?" Tadiel's grin is shining and beautiful, and Dagon marvels at himself for ever being able to part with it, then diligently wipes the come off his thighs, turns the cloth over, and scrubs at the sweat on his chest and under his arms.

"I could be a sans-culotte for you," Dagon says. "Besides, it's a lovely summer day, and I'd like to eat outside without having anything thrown at me."

"Should we risk it?"

"Magicking our clothes? I'm sure it's fine. I do it all the time when I'm on Earth. Hell takes no notice."

"All right."

Dagon crosses to the washbasin, setting a kiss to the knot at the top of Tadiel's spine as he drops his washcloth into the water, then goes to the chair butted up under the door handle on which both of their clothes are lying and waves a hand over it. The expensive but ugly silks turn to rough cotton. The colors mute. The stockings and buckled shoes disappear.

He pulls his new middle-class clothes on and tosses Tadiel's onto the bed. He waits until the Angel is dressed before moving the chair out from under the door handle. As two men together, they are safer in France than in much of Europe and significantly safer than they would be in America, but Dagon still prefers to take precautions.

He often wonders what creeping mental terrors or harshly rebuffed desires prompted some lonely penholder of ancient days to invent the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. It wasn't even as though anything had happened there for a story to be elaborated. Lot and his wife had led long lives, and Sodom had been slowly abandoned, centuries later, due to a long drought. Hell had no special place set aside for sodomites. Though according to Tadiel, Heaven in consideration of the persecution men like them faced on Earth, grouped those who resisted their urges for Heaven's sake in with the similarly misled virgin martyrs. Both groups were given a few special considerations in Paradise. Blessed were the hated, apparently.

"Shall we go enjoy the sunshine, my dear revolutionary?" Dagon teases, adjusting Tadiel's hat to a jaunty angle. Tadiel catches him in a kiss and falls back with a grin.

"Yes. Let's."

They go out into the warmth of the street, walking close enough that the backs of their hands brush together. Dagon wonders if Tadiel has a destination in mind, some little café that caught his attention the same way the well-decorated but middle-of-the-road hotel had. It doesn't really matter. Dagon knows how besotted he is. If Tadiel were to kneel down in the road and decide to eat worms and gravel, Dagon would kneel next to him.

"What do you want to eat?" Dagon asks.

"I enjoy it when we don't have a plan. Let's stop for the first thing that smells good," Tadiel suggests.

They walk through several groups of furtive men, talking with bowed heads. One or two occasionally pop their heads up, like lookouts. The Demon and the Angel pass them by. Dagon can feel the energy churning in the air. Something will come to a head soon. These groups of men know it, and he knows it.

Finally, in a slightly more crowded street, Tadiel stops, breathes deep, and announces, "Here."

Dagon has to agree. The scent of cream and stewing shellfish, along with some spice he can't name, overlays the scent of baking bread here, and it smells wonderful. He shoots Tadiel a sidelong glance. Tadiel doesn't

favor seafood, and watching him attempt to eat crawfish a few decades ago had been almost painful.

"Are you sure?"

Tadiel flashes him a grin and turns toward the café. They request a table out on the patio. Dagon orders a bottle of wine and two bowls of whatever the stew is.

Tadiel tucks his foot against Dagon's and leans back in his chair, tipping his face up toward the sun. Dagon catches himself staring and reaches out for the bottle, pouring them both a glass as the waiter comes back with their bowls and a loaf of bread.

They eat in the glory of comfortable silence, watching the humans walking past until it becomes clear how many of them are stopping in the square. Small groups of men move from place to place, becoming larger groups of men until, as Dagon picks the last of the chewy white things, the name of which he can never remember, out of his stew, it becomes a crowd.

"Oh, there's going to be an orator," Tadiel says with moderate interest.

"They don't call them that anymore," Dagon tells him. "I'm not sure they even have orators these days. Which is a shame. The pagan orators were fascinating."

"They wrote much of that down," Tadiel tells him offhandedly.

"And you've read it?"

Tadiel looks uncomfortable as he takes a sip from his wine glass. "An idea is rarely blasphemous in and of itself."

The crowd seems to be expecting something. There is an empty impromptu wooden stage at the center of the square, and all heads in the groups of men keep flicking toward it, as though waiting for something to appear suddenly.

There's a shift in the crowd. The men, like falling dominoes, begin to turn toward the café, watching the street behind Dagon. Dagon turns to look and sees the man who seems to have already captured the attention of the crowd.

He reminds Dagon of a leper. His arms are bandaged. The little skin visible under his carefully wrapped bandages is discolored and of an odd

texture. He walks into the square flanked by two armed men, and the crowd quiets as he approaches.

There is something vaguely familiar about him, something Dagon can't place. He turns back to Tadiel, whose sun-kissed smile is gone. His face has gone white. "Tadiel?"

"He's supposed to be dead," Tadiel hisses.

Dagon looks back to the man, who is no longer walking toward the crowd but to Dagon and Tadiel and their little patio table, guards still at his side. Dagon readies himself to take some action, knowing all he can really do is disappear and hope to come back for Tadiel.

The man stops in front of him and reaches a hand out to the Angel. Tadiel stares at it for a moment, as though he's forgotten the appropriate response, before he jolts up his hand. He doesn't shake it, just holds it for a moment, staring in awe at the man's scarred face.

"Tadiel," the man says kindly. Ice runs down Dagon's spine. This man knows Tadiel's name and what he is. "Good to see you again, brother."

Tadiel nods, mouth clamped shut. The man turns to Dagon, but doesn't extend his hand this time.

"Dagon, it's good to see you too. Stay and watch, please. We will all talk together afterward."

It sounds like an invitation rather than a demand, but that doesn't quell the prickling along Dagon's neck and up his spine. Nor does the way Tadiel stares as the man smiles and turns away, walking through the crowd as it parts for him.

He runs through all the possibilities of what a man who knows an Angel and a Demon could be and comes up with only one: a prophet. Which would explain everything except why God hasn't smote the two of them where they sit.

The man stands on the stage, raises his arms, and starts to speak.

"Today, after three years of endless speeches from patriotic societies and a deluge of writings, the people are even further from knowing what they should do to resist their oppressors than they were on the very first day of the revolution!"

His mellifluous, declamatory voice is spellbinding, and it takes a moment for Dagon to tear his eyes away.

"What just happened? Who is he?" Dagon demands.

"You didn't… you don't recognize him?" Tadiel manages.

Dagon shakes his head.

"That was Michael. The Archangel."

Dagon shakes his head again in disbelief and clears his mind, looking for the sparks of blue in his mind that indicate Angels on Earth. Tadiel's presence burns like the sun, but he senses no other Angels in France, and only a few others on the continent.

"Tadiel, look for him, you can tell. There are no other Angels here. That"—Dagon flicked a finger at the man in the center of the cheering crowd—"is a human. He can't possibly be both."

"I served in Michael's battalion. I am sure it is him. But he is said to have been killed battling Beelzebub in… America, I believe," Tadiel tells him, eyes still trained on the man as he goes on with his speech.

"No one's ever killed an Archangel," Dagon tells him.

"But we were tol—"

"Tadiel, if anyone had ever killed an Archangel, Hell's cry of victory would have been heard even on Earth. All of Michael's bits would have been paraded through Hell on separate platters. Lucifer would have garlanded himself with the entrails."

Tadiel breaks his dazed stare to quirk his head. "Would he? That's disgusting."

"Lucifer is much changed since you last knew him. The point is rumor has it Archangels can't even *be* killed. And he can't possibly be Michael. It can't be possible for an *Archangel* to sneak up on us," Dagon insists. He hopes he's right. The possibility that he just exchanged pleasantries with an Archangel and is still alive is making hot and cold shivers of horror run over his skin. The idea of Uriel or Gabriel being able to creep around unannounced is making him a little nauseated.

"On our Nation's stage, only the scenery has changed. The cast, intrigue, and machinations remain the same. Today, the principal actors hide behind the curtain where they manipulate with ease those who act the parts

before your eyes. Most of these actors have already disappeared, so new ones have appeared to play the same roles. The revolution will never succeed when the lower classes are left alone to struggle against the upper classes!" the man goes on. He does look like a prophet, arms waving as he shouts. The main difference is the people around him are listening.

"We should go."

"What?" Tadiel's eyes snap back to Dagon. "Why?"

"Are we really going to wait here, flagrantly treasonous, for anyone, Archangel or not, who knows who we are to come back and have a nice chat with us?"

"If he wanted us dead, we'd be dead," Tadiel answers. "If he yet wants us dead, he needs only to report us. We were told to mourn him. You know nothing of his death. We don't even know where we might need to run to."

"That's not a comfort, Tadiel."

"I know," Tadiel says. "But what other option do we have? Disobey an Archangel?"

Dagon stands up, pushing himself back in his chair. "I disobeyed *God*, Tadiel. I'm disobeying Lucifer right now, and I'm not going to sit and wait for an Archangel to come have a drink with me."

"If the educated men, the well off, and the crafty ones of the lower classes first sided against the despot, it was only to turn against the people after they had wormed their way into their confidence and used the people's strength to set themselves up in the place of the privileged orders that they proscribed. Thus it is that the revolution has been made and sustained by the lowest classes of society—the workers, the artisans—"

"I can't, Dagon. I need… I need answers. Tell me you understand."

Dagon looks at Tadiel, then back to the bandaged man. Tadiel has a point. He isn't acting as an Archangel, he doesn't feel like an Angel, and if he had any power to cause their deaths, they would be dead by now. And if he has unrevealed power to kill them, Dagon couldn't leave Tadiel alone to face him.

The cheer of the crowd thunders, and Dagon realizes he's missed the end of the man's speech. When he looks over at Tadiel, his eyes are back on the speaker, wide and… hurt?

Michael, or whoever they're supposed to believe he is, steps between his armed guards and walks out into the crowd, back to Dagon and Tadiel.

"Shall we?"

Tadiel is already rising out of his seat. Dagon takes a moment to stare at him in disbelief, wondering what could possibly be going through the Angel's mind before he realizes.

Obedience.

Tadiel may have carved out a few splintered and fragile reasons why what he and Dagon do is not totally outside his law. Tadiel has mentioned Dagon brings him the comfort and strength he needs to keep on with what Heaven has demanded from him. He's slowly rationalized away the grief and guilt caused by killing Jophiel. He's told himself that he is compassionate, and that Jophiel's death could have been avoided had he listened to reason, or demanded an explanation rather than their lives. Dagon's sure there are other reasons Tadiel has not formed well enough to voice to Dagon for fear he would point out the holes. There are enough little resentments and questions for Tadiel to feel that Heaven owes him Dagon.

But God is unknowable, Heaven is far away, and, for Tadiel, a bandaged Archangel walking toward them is a fact.

The man smiles at Tadiel as he approaches, and Dagon finally sees it. The resemblance Tadiel can so easily see to the Archangel is wholly apparently in the man's righteous and blank smile.

He flinches as Michael turns to him, but the smile takes on a different quality. More real. More human.

The Archangel grabs the still-half-full bottle of wine off the table and takes a swig.

"Calm yourself, Dagon. I'm not going to hurt you." Still facing Dagon, he points the neck of the bottle back toward Tadiel. "Either of you. And you and I have more in common than you think." He spreads his arms, appeasing. "Let me invite you to my home. The three of us should talk together."

"Your… your home?"

"Well, my home for the moment." Michael rubs at his bandaged arms absently, smile suddenly rigid, as though the touch pains him. "Please. My wife was baking when I left. There should be dessert waiting for us."

“Your wife?” Tadiel demands in a hushed, stunned tone. “Lor—”

“Marat,” Michael cuts him off. “My name is Marat now. Jean-Paul Marat. But please, let’s all discuss this privately.”

“Tadiel?” Dagon asks carefully. The Angel’s eyes are wide, his mouth hanging open as he stares at Michael in disbelief.

“Did you rebel?” Tadiel asks hoarsely.

“No, my dear little soldier. I deserted. But, come, let’s discuss this away from here.”

Michael turns. His guards turn with him. Dagon watches Tadiel stare after him for a moment, then takes his lover by the shoulder and steers him along behind the mysterious Archangel.

They march through the streets of Paris, guards on either side, Tadiel never quite taking his eyes off Michael. Michael ducks his head to his escorts when they come to a modest, nondescript building. They stop at the door, and Michael leads Dagon and Tadiel up a slim and steep staircase.

“We rarely stay in Paris anymore. This is a temporary lodging,” Michael excuses.

Dagon stays close to Tadiel, trying to set his hands unobtrusively against his back while Michael unlocks his apartment door. Tadiel leans back slightly against Dagon’s palm.

“I hope I don’t seem too paranoid, but my dear Simone does worry, and I hate to upset her.”

“Simone is your wife?” Dagon asks.

“Yes.” Michael pulls his door open and steps in. “Simone? I’ve come home. I’ve brought old friends with me.”

A woman, plump with drably brunette hair pulled back from her plain but kind face, steps into the small main room, crossing it quickly and throwing her thick forearms around Michael.

“Jean-Paul,” she sighs. Dagon remembers the armed guard back and forth from the square to the rented room and wonders how worried this woman must have been that her husband would not return, and how oblivious she must be to the fact he was once the fiercest weapon of Heaven against the full terror of Hell.

Michael wraps his arms around her, and places a kiss to the top of her head, making Dagon feel oddly as though he is intruding.

"Gentlemen, my wife, Simone," Michael says after finally letting her go.

She drops a somewhat breathless curtsey. "It's good to meet Jean-Paul's friends."

Dagon lifts his hat to her. Tadiel stares.

"Could you give us some privacy, darling?" Michael asks her softly.

"Oh…." She eyes him. It's difficult to tell if it's suspicion or worry. He meets her gaze with an imploring smile.

"Of course. I… I do have a few errands to run. There are cakes and coffee in the kitchen, messieurs. Please help yourselves."

"Thank you," Dagon tells her. Tadiel still doesn't react. Dagon recognizes the look. Tadiel is overwhelmed, unable to take much more in, facing too big a change in what he believes. Again.

"Shall we sit?" Dagon asks Michael. His voice doesn't shake nearly as much as he had expected it to, being left alone with an Archangel. Michael nods and waves Dagon and Tadiel over to a small circular wooden table strewn with papers.

"Please pardon the mess." Michael sighs, shuffling the papers toward the middle of the table. "It's a busy and thrilling time for the revolution."

"Lord, what is happening here?" Tadiel finally asks. His tone is careful, pitched deliberately between demanding and imploring.

Michael holds up a hand. "No. Not Lord. Michael, if you must, but not Lord." Dagon notices the way Michael rubs at his bandages again as he takes three glasses down from the sideboard and sets them out. "So. What does Heaven say about me?"

"That you are dead," Tadiel tells him. "Killed by Beelzebub."

"Beelzebub?" Michael sucks his teeth as he settles into his chair. "That's embarrassing. Well. In a way I suppose I did die, at least in Heaven's eyes. I turned my back on Heaven years ago."

"What? Why?"

"Tadiel, I'm surprised you haven't guessed. How long can you prepare for an unjust war? How many women and children do you watch die in the

name of a God who sees them as pawns? How long before you question a creator who makes a host to sing his praises and burns a third of Heaven to punish one Angel's disobedience? Dagon, you Fell, you follow my reasoning?"

"Yes, Lor—"

"Ah—" Michael cuts him off. "There should be no Lords. Not in Heaven, not in Hell, not on Earth. If God could have been questioned, if Lucifer *could be* questioned, we'd all be at peace now. Like France will be when the king falls. That's what I've done; that's why I am here. I could no longer fight for God. I would not submit to Lucifer. There was a middle ground—I became human."

Dagon feels his jaw fall open.

"You… how?" Tadiel demands.

Michael shrugs and pours out three glasses of wine. "I came to Earth. And I cut off my wings."

Dagon feels his stomach lurch. Tadiel gasps. He hunches his shoulders, as though he's imagining the feeling.

"And… Heaven has done nothing?" Dagon asks. "But… you're… only a man now. And a man directing people's faith from God to the Nation. How are you still alive?"

"Let me answer your question with another—where do Angels go when they die?"

Dagon doesn't understand. Tadiel's eyes crinkle as his face pulls in confusion. "They… don't. They don't go anywhere. They just… stop. Angels don't have souls."

"And humans do," Dagon supplies as Michael's gambit dawns on him. "No one knows if you have to be taken to Heaven and Hell like everyone else, or, being as you were, you would have the power to decide your own fate. No one knows where you'll go."

"Or what I'll do," Michael agrees with a grin.

"So… you became mortal? You'll die?" Tadiel's jaw works.

"It's wonderful, isn't it?"

"But… you don't know where you will go either. What if you're unclaimed? What if you go into the Dark?"

Michael shrugs. “Then I will know what is there.”

Dagon sips at his wine, unable to think of any response. Tadiel continues to stare at Michael in horror. Michael gives him a pitying look.

“Tadiel, living forever is not living. I know you know this. What were you before you *tried* Earth? Drank the wine. Ate the bread. Smelled the flowers. The two of you, you’re clearly lovers—would you give up sex for Divine Contemplation?

Tadiel blushes, instant and red. “How did you—”

“I am on Earth now, and I am in love too. I can see the signs. But when I was still an Angel? I stalked the Earth a dozen times hunting Demons and knew nothing. Do you know when I first felt rain, Tadiel? In 1699. I first ate in 1728. And Simone—” The corners of his mouth tip up, as though he can’t stop it. “A first kiss should not take an eternity, my dear little soldiers. I cast off Heaven as France will cast off Louis. We can’t change Heaven or Hell—but the Earth can change. We can fight for justice and freedom on Earth. Heaven only fights to be the victor in an eternity of ‘I told you so’. A few years more of love and victory and wine and shallots and sex before going off into the same undiscovered country my brothers in a real and alive fight go toward? I will die with a smile on my face, little soldiers, and ask no man to mourn me.” Michael leans back in his chair, flicking his arms up, the speaker in the square again for a moment.

“You remind me of Lucifer, back in the old days,” Dagon remarks.

“Dagon!” Tadiel hisses, eyes wide and horrified.

“No, it’s all right.” Michael waves away Tadiel’s protest. “I know what you mean. I do sound like the Morning Star. But I think we here assembled can agree that Lucifer, while since corrupted by his decision to rule in Hell rather than serve in Heaven, had the right idea.”

Michael holds his wine glass out in a toast. Dagon senses Tadiel hesitate, but they both raise their glasses.

“To humanity,” Tadiel says, clearly cutting off any attempt to toast Lucifer.

“To Earth,” Dagon replies.

Michael scoffs, taps his glass to those of the other Angels in varying states of disgrace, and announces, “To freedom.”

There isn't much else to say. Tadiel and Dagon drink their wine while Michael tells them about being Marat and offers some colorful commentary on names they've heard, but not really noticed. Robespierre. The Marquis de Sade. Dagon finds himself happy for Michael and a little envious of his mortal conviction that he will watch justice brought about in the world.

Tadiel seizes the opportunity for he and Dagon to excuse themselves when Simone comes home with a full satchel and Michael leaps up to help her.

He corners Dagon and Tadiel in the doorway as they set out to leave, taps the side of his nose, and says, "A word to the wise. The world changes tonight. Pluck a few souls from the fray if you must, but I suggest you take a room, make love, and ignore the street noise."

"Thank you, Michael," Tadiel says quietly. Michael extends his hand, and Tadiel shakes it gingerly.

Michael doesn't shake Dagon's hand, and though Dagon's offered him nothing and the magic wouldn't claim his soul for Hell, Dagon takes no offense. He's never specifically sought out a human, but it's possible the magic would work in the same way it does with Angels, and he doesn't blame Michael for wanting to avoid the possibility of announcing his location to a Demon.

"Isn't anyone righteous anymore?" Tadiel huffs as they get back out onto the street.

"Perhaps not," Dagon allows. "But he does seem happy."

"He *cut off* his *wings*, Dagon," Tadiel grits out. "The *force* of his rejection… it astonishes… and—" Tadiel's fists clench at his sides.

"And what, sweet?"

"God lied to us."

"Well… Heaven is still allowed to lie, even if they aren't supposed to," Dagon says.

"We… were lied to, to keep anyone from finding Michael," Tadiel continues. "Talking to him. Being swayed by him. Maybe even to keep anyone from killing him. To keep his soul from flying up to revolutionize Heaven or… side with Hell?"

“Tadiel….” Dagon moves closer, setting a hand over Tadiel's shoulder. “Your captain is still a leader. He’s even on the same page as you. You love humanity too.”

“But what will come of Michael’s rebellion? Don’t tell me that Lucifer’s was a success.”

“We could worry about that later, sweet,” Dagon suggests. “Michael and his mortal soul are still very much on Earth. There is time yet.”

“And how much? He supports violence. He is in some way afflicted. And decades are not long, Dagon. We’ve blinked and missed centuries.”

“We could follow his advice, at least.”

“Make love while the world changes?”

“Sounds like the best way to spend a revolution to me,” Dagon laughs.

Tadiel stops walking and wheels around to face Dagon, angry and pale. “Dagon, I used to think I knew Heaven. That it was simple. I thought Heaven was simple love. And with each passing century, I’m proven wrong, again. It’s exactly like Hell, Dagon. God is just like Lucifer, proud and unforgiving, and this whole war is a pissing match!” Tadiel’s yelling now, and even among revolutionaries, most humans still think they believe too much to let “God is just like Lucifer” stand.

“Come here,” Dagon sighs, settling both hands around Tadiel’s shoulders. He eases him forward. Tadiel lets Dagon envelop him in his arms. Even though they are still in the street, he lets Tadiel bury his face in his neck and runs a hand down Tadiel’s spine. They smell like wine, and excited groups of sans-culottes are sputtering around the streets as the sun sets. They don’t stick out much.

“Sometimes.” Tadiel starts his whisper so quietly Dagon almost can’t make it out. “Sometimes, I worry God doesn’t love us. Me or the other Angels. Or worse, that we have no proof he ever loved us at all. That Lucifer and now… even Michael, are right. And if they are… what am I doing, Dagon?”

“I don’t know how to answer you, sweet.”

Tadiel grips Dagon tighter. “I love you, Dagon. Even Michael can see it.”

“I love you as well,” Dagon says, turning his mouth to Tadiel’s ear, whispering so his lips tickle the shell of the Angel’s ear. “I have always loved you. As we walked in Heaven, before I knew what it meant, I think I loved you.”

“Let’s go back to our room. Please.”

“Yes. Of course.”

They walk back with their hands brushing. As dusk falls, Tadiel throws caution to the wind and takes Dagon’s hand in his own, holding it all the way through the hotel lobby and back up to their room. Dagon locks the door as Tadiel drops down onto the bed with a groan of what sounds very much like exhaustion. Dagon can sympathize.

He pulls off his hat, jacket, and vest, dropping them across the floor as he too gravitates toward the bed. He falls next to Tadiel and traces a finger over Tadiel’s forehead, brushing his hair away from his face. Tadiel’s eyes flutter shut for a moment, but open again and he continues to stare up at the ceiling as Dagon slides his hand over Tadiel’s cheek, down his neck, and pulls one of the Angel’s jacket buttons free, then another.

He has all of Tadiel’s buttons undone and the laces of his shirt pulled loose before Tadiel sits up and grabs his hand. Dagon shivers as Tadiel thumbs over his knuckles.

“I feel I can’t know Heaven or Hell, but I’ve always known you,” the Angel recites under his breath, pressing a chaste kiss to Dagon’s lips. “You told me that once.”

“I did.”

“Dagon?”

“Yes?”

“I want… to know you further.”

“What do you mean, sweet?” Dagon asks.

“Dagon, I want….” Tadiel’s request peters out. Dagon waits. “I want to….”

“What, Tadiel? Ask me for anything,” Dagon tells him, softly feathering his fingers into Tadiel’s hair. “What do you want?”

“To know what it would feel like… if you were inside me.”

Tadiel's request makes Dagon pull back in surprise, and the soft, hopeful look on Tadiel's face makes him lean back into the kiss.

Dagon follows Tadiel as the Angel lowers himself back onto the bed. Dagon smoothes his hand down Tadiel's chest and stomach, pulling open the buttons of his trousers with an easy, practiced flick of his wrist.

"I want you to make love to me," Tadiel whispers. "I need you to be solid and understandable and… here… wrapped up in me."

Dagon falters on the middle button. "Yes, Tadiel. I will."

Tadiel kisses him, and Dagon feels the light touches of the Angel pulling at the strings of Dagon's shirt, then butterflying over the buttons of his trousers before shoving them down the Demon's hips.

"We need—" Dagon murmurs against Tadiel's lips as he finishes undoing his lover's trousers, tugging them down over his thighs and exposing his already hardening cock.

"I know," Tadiel says. He pulls Dagon's shirt over his head and tosses it away. He sits up and Dagon removes his shirt as well, then helps him out of his trousers. As he finishes pulling the fabric over Tadiel's ankles, the Angel hands him a small bottle.

"A little manifestation in the middle of a disaster should be all right," he says.

"Of course," Dagon agrees, taking the bottle and laying Tadiel back down against the pillows.

He's thrilling with want and a happy sort of terror. Tadiel has never asked him for anything before. Every time they bring their naked flesh together, it's Dagon asking or initiating. Tadiel has never once refused, but it's still a change.

Dagon wonders how long the Angel has been thinking about this. How long it took him to decide on this request, or what he was waiting to happen before he decided he wanted this.

Dagon presses his body into Tadiel's, kissing him slow and sweet, shifting his hips against Tadiel's, enough to feel their cocks firming between them.

He can't bring himself to rush this.

Tadiel's arms wrap around his hips, bringing the two of them tighter together. His shoulders shift in the familiar way and Dagon feels the soft down of feathers around him. He manifests his own wings and breathes through the faint, warm tickle of Tadiel's fingertips tracing down the edges of them, getting harder with every inch of acknowledged skin. He reaches Tadiel's knees, pulling them up. His lover follows the motion, wrapping his thighs around Dagon's hips and bringing him closer.

They've been tracing lips over every part of the other's body all day, and now Dagon can't seem to wrench himself from Tadiel's mouth. Away from the little gasps and sounds Tadiel is breathing into him as their cocks and chests and wings press against each other. The muscles in Dagon's thighs are firm against Tadiel's ass as his lover pulls him down harder, kisses him deeper, rocks against him faster.

Dagon pants into Tadiel's mouth as he feels beads of wetness smear between them.

"Tadiel?"

Tadiel pulls him into another kiss before dropping his legs back down to the mattress.

"Yes. Now," Tadiel agrees.

Dagon, sitting on haunches between Tadiel's legs, pats around the mattress, looking for where he'd dropped the bottle. The distant boom of cannon fire accompanies his little hiss of victory at finally finding the bottle.

"Michael's rebellion?" Tadiel asks.

"It's far away from here," Dagon answers. "And it's nothing to do with us."

Tadiel casts a quick glance out the window, but returns his eyes to Dagon's face and lets his knees fall farther apart. Dagon uncorks the bottle and pours a little of the contents over his fingers. A scent of flowers blooms instantly in the room. Dagon chuckles at Tadiel, who shrugs.

Dagon spreads the oil across his fingers, noting the smell of violets and some other floral scent he can't place. It doesn't matter what it's really called, he thinks, breathing it in as he watches Tadiel spread out before him, sweat-sheened skin and flushed chest rising and falling steadily. It's going

to be burned into his memory, as is the scent of this moment, for the rest of eternity.

He dips his fingers between Tadiel's cheeks, looking for the puckered skin between them and rubbing back and forth when he finds it. He feels the shiver go through Tadiel's body and uses his free hand to nudge his lover's legs farther apart, still working over the spot. His stomach twists when he presses his finger a little way in and sees the tip disappear into Tadiel's warm body. Tadiel makes a small noise under his breath as Dagon pulls the finger back. He adds a little more oil down the length of his finger and returns, swiping the pad around Tadiel's rim and pushing back in.

"Like this, sweet?"

"Yes," Tadiel breathes as Dagon pushes his slick finger inside steadily, until the first knuckle, then the second disappears. He feels soft and warm inside, but so tight Dagon's not sure how this will ever work. They've seen it done, having accidentally walked invisibly onto more than one artist with a male lover doing more than painting in his studio, but Dagon had never put much thought into how those lovers had gotten to the position he and Tadiel had found them in.

Tadiel gasps as Dagon pushes his finger in to the hilt, then twists, coating him in slickness before pulling out a little way, then moving back in, slow and steady and careful, in a rhythm he's sure he won't be able to limit himself to with Tadiel flushed, hot, and tight underneath him.

"What's it feel like?" Dagon whispers

"I don't know," Tadiel replies. "It's… can you… move around… not in?"

The change in Tadiel's body is instant. Dagon can see the way the muscles in his stomach clench and unclench, the way the grooves down his thighs deepen. He presses against the walls and sees the Angel's head rock back as he feels Tadiel's body open welcomingly around him. Dagon's cock jumps at the soft noise Tadiel makes when Dagon pulls free to coat his first two fingers in the oil.

Tadiel moans and twitches when Dagon presses the two oiled fingertips a little way into his entrance and twists them around, spreading the skin wider before he tries to press in farther. Dagon rings the finger of his clean hand around the base of his own cock and squeezes gently, trying to take the edge off as he circles his fingers around the inside of Tadiel's

rim. It only helps until Tadiel works his hips down, bringing Dagon's fingers in deep enough for him to feel the way Tadiel is trying to clench around him.

Dagon rings his fingers tighter around himself; between the pressure and the thought of dying inside Tadiel too early, he's able to calm himself enough to work inside his lover farther, spreading him open.

"More, Dagon, more," Tadiel moans. Dagon's never seen him quite like this. Never quite this desperate or flushed, never seen him wriggle his hips this urgently. Dagon keeps going, inching and twisting, opening Tadiel up further. Tadiel accompanies the motion with a litany of gasps and nonsensical mutters. Dagon pulls back, spreading his fingers farther apart as he does, so they're pulled wider than before when he returns to Tadiel's rim. He twists them again, watching the way Tadiel's eyes clench shut and his mouth falls open and his head rocks back.

He wishes he could make Tadiel feel like this all the time. Make every little hurt and all the huge betrayals that turn Tadiel's beautiful smile into a morose frown go away with two little fingers.

Cannons boom again as he pulls his fingers away, letting his attention leave Tadiel long enough to realize the street noise has gotten louder.

"Dagon," Tadiel begs, clearly oblivious to the first drumbeats of war happening around them. And why shouldn't he be? It's not their war. Tadiel brings his knees up so they knock against Dagon's arms and Dagon sets three fingers to Tadiel's threshold, working his fingertips inside before leaning over Tadiel's body and catching his gasping mouth in a kiss. Tadiel's fingers dig into Dagon's biceps hard as Dagon works three fingers inside. It's too hard to twist his hand at this angle, and he focuses on the way Tadiel trembles underneath him as he pushes in again. Tadiel cries out into Dagon's mouth and clenches his ass around Dagon's hand when he brushes across a slightly different-feeling spot inside.

"More?" he asks, pressing again before Tadiel answers. Tadiel spasms and sputters underneath him, but digs his fingers in harder and replies, "No… not… it's…."

Dagon is not sure why nothing stokes his desire like Tadiel gone so deep into sensation that he's incoherent, but the way Tadiel is trying to spit out words makes him drop his hips down so he can rub his cock against the Angel's stomach.

“Not just pressing… like the… when you move….”

“Like this?” Dagon asks, moving his wrist enough for his fingers to pull in and out of Tadiel’s rim and brush against that spot.

An animal sound rips out of Tadiel’s beautiful mouth, and Dagon can’t stop himself from sliding his cock against his lover’s stomach again.

“Tadiel, please,” he gasps.

“Yes,” Tadiel replies. “Yes, now, yes.”

Dagon draws his fingers out, quelling his desire to rip them from Tadiel’s body. Instead he pulls his hand back, rocks back in, pulls out, rocks back in. He sits on his haunches, watching the way Tadiel’s pink, stretched skin pulls around his hand as he pulls his fingertips free.

Tadiel drapes his calves over Dagon’s hips, urging him forward again as Dagon hurriedly dumps more oil in his hand and tosses the bottle over the side of the bed. He slicks his hand over his already aching cock, sets it under Tadiel’s balls, and traces the tip down between his legs and cheeks until he feels himself press in a little way. Tadiel chokes out a moan, and Dagon holds himself there, starting to enter, but not quite in. He leans over Tadiel’s body, kisses him, and begins to move forward.

It’s tighter than Tadiel’s hands, warmer than his mouth, and it makes the sounds out of Tadiel’s mouth that much sweeter. Dagon sinks in a little way, rocks back, catches each gasp the motion pulls out of his lover’s throat between his own lips. He’s concentrating on the feel of Tadiel’s lips moving and chest rising and arms and wings quaking so hard he’s surprised when he feels Tadiel’s soft skin against his groin. He inches out and presses back in.

Tadiel whines and grips him harder. “Wait… stop. Need… Oh, Dagon.”

“Tadiel? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Tadiel pants so hurriedly he almost sounds impatient. “Just… don’t move yet.”

Dagon’s more than happy to comply. The way Tadiel is clenching experimentally around his cock is too much for him, too. He drops his forehead to Tadiel’s and breathes deep. There’s screaming and gunfire down in the streets now, accompanied by small snatches of drunken songs, and all of it fades away when Dagon feels Tadiel nod against his forehead.

He grinds in a little deeper, surprised with Tadiel arches his hips up to meet the cautious thrust, then does it again when Dagon pulls back and

surges forward again.

He feels drunk on the pleasure as he and Tadiel move together. It's an out-of-context feeling, the way he's heard humans describe dreaming, where one thing takes precedence over everything else and focusing on more than one thing is impossible. Dagon feels like he can't feel the sheets under his knees, shins, or palms; he can only feel Tadiel's hands over his back and wings, his feathers against his skin, his furnace-hot and vise-tight body around his cock. The rioting outside is nothing but background drumming to the symphony of Tadiel's sighs, gasps, and moans.

"Fuck!" Tadiel screams the first time Dagon thrusts in hard, and Dagon moans with the effort of holding himself back. In thousands of years he's never heard Tadiel swear. He thrusts in hard again, trying to lean down enough to kiss Tadiel yet sit far enough back that he has leverage to move the way Tadiel wants and not quite managing it.

"Touch me," Tadiel wrings out. "Dagon, touch me."

Dagon nearly falls as he fumbles his weight over to one arm, snaking the other between their bodies. He's barely brushed his fingers over the rock-hard skin of Tadiel's cock before his lover arches back with a cry and pours out over his palm, wetting it further with each leap of his cock in Dagon's hand.

The soft "Oh wow," that Tadiel pants out after he's stopped spilling over Dagon's fist is all it takes to send Dagon over the edge, rutting down hard into Tadiel, grinding helplessly inside him as his own seed spurts, stars bursting behind his eyes until he comes back. Tadiel is kissing him with his hands cupped around the top joint of his wings, loose and pliant and whispering "I love you" as the cannons fire over and over again.

"WHY did we even come here?" Dagon asks as he and Tadiel turn a corner.

"Nostalgia?" Tadiel suggests. He runs a finger over his little mustache, smoothing it.

Dagon laughs at him. "We haven't been in London in three hundred years. There's nothing left to be nostalgic over."

"That's the reason I'm nostalgic," Tadiel replies.

“What’s making you so gloomy tonight?”

“The same things as always, just brought into the light.” He sounds sad, and it tugs at Dagon’s heart. With a quick glance around them, he reaches for Tadiel’s hand. Considering the poor writer’s trial, Oscar… something, they need to be more careful than ever. People have names for men who are together like they are now. It’s more dangerous than it’s ever been.

“Oh. And I was concerned you might be vague and ominous about what troubles you.”

“Word of Michael’s true fate is spreading since Uriel’s demise. The Angels are… considering their options. The remaining five Archangels are beginning to keep closer tabs on Angels who spend too much time on Earth.”

Dagon tightens his grip on Tadiel’s fingers and notes the moment it takes Tadiel to grip back.

“Oh.”

Tadiel clears his throat, flicks his eyes up at Dagon, then looks back out over the darkening, foggy street, as though it’s grown suddenly fascinating in the last few seconds.

“I meant to ask—did Lucifer actually wind up garlanding himself in Uriel’s entrails?”

“No,” Dagon replies. “Lucifer is… refining his methods and manner. To an extent. Uriel’s body is still displayed, though.”

“Displayed?”

“He’s hanging from the sign at the entrance.”

“Sign?”

“Yes. That annoying want-to-be political… Dartan… Davron….”

“Dante?”

“Dante. Yes. Lucifer thought his imaginary sign ‘Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here’ was charming.”

“Oh,” Tadiel replies, swinging their hands a little between them, a few inches forward, a few inches back. “I wonder if Dante would find knowing that charming. I believe we got him.”

“Really?”

“As you’ve said, we must recruit more than just pikemen and foot soldiers. Heaven has plucked a few propagandists.”

“Yes. That is why we took Christopher Marlowe. But you’ve avoided the question, sweet.” Dagon drags the conversation back around. Tadiel is ducking something, and it’s making him shiver as though the damp, cold air actually affects him. “What else ails you?”

“I have considered my options as well,” Tadiel answers. His voice is graveled. Toneless. “The Archangels are suspicious of me. I spend too much time on Earth. I’m often using little magic and difficult to locate. I may… need to decide between Heaven and Earth. As Michael did.”

Dagon’s heart freezes. So do his steps.

“Tadiel. Michael died. Murdered by some Girondin sympathizer. While suffering a skin ailment in his bathtub. *Utterly* mortal. He went into the Dark, Tadiel.”

“I know. But I’ve been thinking about little else for the last hundred years, and Michael may have had a point. He did live.”

“And then he suffered and died!” Dagon hisses.

“And wasn’t held hostage in Heaven. And he escaped this endless stockpiling of souls to fight in an increasingly pointless war.”

“Tadiel—you… you’re not seriously considering cutting off your wings, are you?”

“Not today.” Tadiel shrugs.

Dagon pulls at his hand, whirling the Angel around so they are face-to-face. “Tadiel! You… you can’t do this!” He didn’t mean to yell, and he knows it’s dangerous in this part of London as the sun sets and the fog rises. He forces his voice down. “Don’t. Don’t do this.”

“Dagon—”

“No.”

Tadiel sets his hand at Dagon’s shoulder, trying to calm him and failing. “Dagon, hush, I won’t, but—”

“Tadiel, if you do this—”

“I wo—”

“Then so will I.”

Tadiel’s mouth snaps shut and his eyes go wide. Dagon feels his heart pounding so hard in his chest he wonders if Tadiel can feel the echo of it through his arms.

“Dagon—”

“I will, Tadiel,” Dagon threatens again. “And then we would be locked on Earth. And if we were found together and sent to prison, there would be nothing we could do. If you got whooping cough, or typhoid, or tuberculosis, or any one of the many horrors of this world, I would watch you die and be alone.”

Tadiel presses forward against Dagon’s arms and kisses him softly. “I’m sorry, Dagon. You’re right. I’m just… thinking out loud.” Tadiel’s hands settle at his neck. He kisses him apologetically and then pulls back quickly, settling his hand back into Dagon’s. “The corruption of Heaven wears on me. We are supposed to be a paradise. A refuge. Like the humans say—a better place. But I’m no longer certain. Sometimes I wish I’d followed you to Hell.”

“Hell’s gone from a location to an idea, since the humans started to outnumber us,” Dagon replied. “Back in the old days when it was just warm and dark, I would’ve pushed for you to Fall as well, but now? I don’t think the fire and brimstone would agree with you.”

“Well. Yes.” Tadiel sighs. He turns and resumes their stroll down the darkening street, dropping his hand back down to his side when a couple of workmen duck out of an alley across the street.

“I wonder how long it will be before someone else tries it, though,” Tadiel says. “Word has gotten out. God lied. The Archangels lied. One *can* leave Heaven without going to Hell. Many of the Angels don’t believe Uriel truly died. Everyone suspects he has defected as well. I may be the only Angel who knows the truth for certain. The current rumor asserts he Fell to America and became a cowboy.”

“Really? Uriel? That’s a rough life for him.”

“Well. No one would have seen Michael as a violent revolutionary either.”

“So. You’re being watched?” Dagon asks.

“Not specifically me. My entire order is ‘under observation’. It’s thought that Angels who spend too much time on Earth are more susceptible to… persuasion.”

The workmen cut down another alley, and Dagon takes Tadiel’s hand back in his own.

“Shall we find an inn tonight?” Dagon asks. “Is it safe?”

“It may not be, but I won’t return to Heaven without spending the night with you,” Tadiel responds.

Dagon bites his lip and shoots another suspicious look down the road.

“Come on.”

DAGON walks down a corridor in Hell, listening to the way his footsteps ring out on the red-tiled floor. Lucifer has changed the wallpaper again. It’s red with an old-fashioned gold pattern on it now. Little lanterns hang from the ceiling, but they glow with a magical approximation of electric lights.

It’s strangely off-putting.

Dagon is starting to worry. Things are getting… odd. He hasn’t seen Tadiel in decades. It’s only been forty years, which, even since they became… whatever it is they are to each other, isn’t the longest he’s gone without at least dropping in on Tadiel, but there’s something else going on. The absence of Tadiel that weighs on him when he’s on Earth but without his lover is heavier. The pain all Fallen Angels feel at the loss of God’s love cuts deeper. Something’s changing. Dagon can feel the evidence on Earth, and he can see it in Hell.

Lucifer is starting to worry him too. He bites back a smile as he suddenly imagines the face Tadiel would pull in response to being told something as stupid and obvious as “Lucifer is worrying me,” but then he comes across one of the pictures as he walks the wide red-tiled corridors of Hell, and yes, he is worried.

Hell had always been a work in progress. Lucifer, probably because of the position he once held, hadn’t lost many of his powers the way the other Fallen Angels had. He could still lie, but took such perverse pleasure in never doing so and tempting people with the truth instead that Dagon often wondered if the prohibition against Demons lying was Lucifer’s law

imposed rather than Heaven's power revoked. And he could make and remake Hell as he saw fit.

And it was starting to get odd. The divisions between Hell, where Lucifer, the original Renegade Angels, and the one or two Angels who had been cast out since the war resided, and the Pit, where human souls were twisted into Low Order Demons, were becoming more absolute. The tortures of the Pit, which had gone from imaginary, to poetic, to simple had turned gruesome and eternal.

And even that, Dagon could accept. This wasn't Heaven, where the Angels vastly outnumbered souls. Human corruptions had outnumbered Fallen Angels down here since the Black Plague. As for the increase in punishments, while Dagon had to admit it was disturbing, it made sense. Hell had changed. It was no longer a simple repository for deniers or nonbelievers. It had moved past being a place that doled out slaps on the wrist for sins that Heaven and Hell thought were pretty minor but Earth had damned, like working on Sunday or touching oneself. Now, the punishments were gruesome but so were the crimes. Hell had taken its fill of apathetics and decent people who overlooked made-up teachings and was now topping off its gathered infantry with real maniacs. Murderers. Rapists. Those who tortured for pleasure rather than righteousness.

It had taken most of eternity, but Hell had finally discovered Evil.

And so the separation of the infantry into the Pit, away from the Generals in the palace, was logical. It was hard to dredge up halfhearted opposition to rapists having their skin peeled off their bodies like apples. Plus, torturing the criminals of Earth kept the more… vengeful of the Fallen Angels occupied and away from Earth. It worked.

But Dagon found the pictures disturbing.

There had only been one picture to begin with: an enormous black-and-white photograph of Lucifer, in a suit and bowler hat—clearly Marlowe's idea, Dagon had thought at the time—hanging directly behind Lucifer's throne. But now they were everywhere. Lucifer's saintly smile and increasingly manic eyes overlooked every hallway. Every room. Even a handful of the racks in the Pit.

Dagon had hoped these little moments of frozen time, posted everywhere and clearly charting the change in the Angel who had started

out as their forward-thinking brother and slowly become their despotic ruler, would allow some of the other Renegades to notice that Lucifer was becoming… eccentric.

Dagon looks over the photograph again. This one is of Lucifer in a double-breasted suit and a fedora. He's sitting in a library, under a beam of sunlight, smiling at the camera in a warm, almost loving way. It makes Dagon's skin crawl.

Wondering whom they found to take the photograph, and what must have happened to him, makes Dagon's skin want to crawl *off*.

"Dagon?"

It takes everything Dagon has in him not to jump at the sound of Lucifer's soft, melodic voice, or cringe as the hand settles over his shoulder.

"It's good to see you, brother. You spend so little time in Hell these days."

"Yes. Well. I like to work," Dagon replies, turning to face Lucifer. He's dressed in a suit. He's always dressed in a suit these days. His longer-than-currently stylish hair is slicked back into waves, with one boyish curl trying to escape. Everything about him screams elegance and charm. Except his eyes, which blaze with ambition and righteousness.

"But, you know. Nice to come down and warm up. Sometimes. Sir."

Lucifer holds up a finger. "Ah ah ah!"

"Sorry. *Brother*," Dagon corrects with a rictal smile.

Lucifer's face blooms with what, aside from his slightly unfocused eyes, looks like happiness.

"We will beat Heaven, Dagon. We will show God."

"Yes, si—brother," Dagon agrees instantly.

"We'll show him," Lucifer repeats. He claps his hand affectionately against Dagon's face, then slips past him down the hallway, humming something Dagon doesn't recognize. Dagon shivers and goes back to Earth.

He *needs* to see Tadiel.

Tadiel takes a deep gulp of the air when his feet hit the Earth. It's sour, smoky, and polluted, hardly like it used to be, but still *perfect* after such a long absence. He's blowing out the whole breath again before he realizes he's standing in a warm rain. He throws his arms out and laughs himself breathless before trying to get a hold on himself.

He needs to find Dagon.

He takes another deep breath, feels the rain, and tries to quiet his mind. It takes him a few moments. Finally he sees him, glowing vibrant silver in his mind, when the other Demons are dull glitters of red.

A few blue bursts sparkle and then dull again in his mind as a few, only a few, other Angels return to Earth. Tadiel focuses his mind on that spot of silver, concentrates on Dagon's face, his lips, his voice, his body, and transports himself.

He's in a dark room, the light from the one lamp being sucked into the dark green of the carpet, the thick, closed curtains, and the bedspread. It's a kind of inn. He doesn't notice much more than that, because Dagon is lying spread-eagle on the bed, an open book hiding his face from view.

His clothes are ridiculous. Blue breeches that flare out hugely at the bottom, as if his beloved sixteenth-century breeches had fallen down below his knees. His shirt is loud, hideous, but open, revealing his muscular chest, dusted in blond hair, almost invisible except for where the light catches in it.

Dagon tosses the book down and sits up. "Tadiel!"

Tadiel feels the corners of his mouth quirk up at the huge walrus mustache sitting on top of Dagon's upper lip, but he doesn't even take the time to laugh before launching himself forward, into Dagon, onto Dagon, against Dagon, pushing him back onto the bed.

"Where have y—" Dagon huffs against Tadiel's mouth.

"Heaven," Tadiel replies. He's already pulling at the button at the top of Dagon's pants, looking for the next one and not finding it. Stymied, he tugs harder, willing to simply rip the damned uncooperative things off if he has to. "Off, off, off," he mutters.

Dagon's hands drop between them. He seizes the little metal tab at the top of little metal teeth and pulls down, unclasping the front of his breeches.

“It’s a zipper, sweet. Fast,” Dagon whispers to him, groaning when Tadiel grabs the pants at the waistband and shucks them all the way down to his knees. “You’ve been in Heaven this whole time?”

“Don’t talk yet, don’t ask yet, kiss me,” Tadiel replies. He falls down into Dagon’s body, contact more important than skin right now. It’s been so long, so much has passed, he’d been so worried he would never come back down to Earth at all, and now here he is, with Dagon half naked underneath him, and he wants this more than *anything*.

“Tadiel, you’re worrying me.”

Tadiel shoves his hands underneath the hanks of Dagon’s shirt, shoving it backward so hard his knuckles bash into the wooden headboard.

“Shh,” he implores.

“Tadiel? Are you all right?”

“I am now,” Tadiel says. “I will be. Dagon, I’m begging you.” He grabs the Demon by the back of his head and crushes their mouths together. “Need you.”

Dagon’s hands finally fall onto him, pulling open the buttons of Tadiel’s suit jacket and throwing the heavy gray material back off his body. “Okay. But after—”

“Everything. Absolutely everything,” Tadiel promises, sitting up and fighting the rest of the way out of his suit jacket, then takes the sides of his dress shirt in hand and rips it open, sending buttons flying.

The way Dagon’s mouth drops open, the burn of heat in his eyes, makes Tadiel even harder, even more desperate for the feel of Dagon sliding into him, the hot drag, the full pressure. A feeling he’s gone entirely without for far too long.

Dagon kicks himself the rest of the way out of his trousers, and Tadiel buries himself in kissing Dagon as Dagon undoes Tadiel's trousers, pulls them to his knees, and then lifts each knee in turn to pull the fabric free. Tadiel drops down into his lap, both of their cocks standing hard between them.

“I need to feel you here,” Tadiel tries to explain. Heaven has felt so empty without Dagon. It’s been so long Tadiel’s not even surprised he’s this hard, ready, and desperate simply from the wet-stone-and-woods smell of him, like a graveyard in the rain.

He presses forward, knocking Dagon back against the headboard with a *thunk* that makes Dagon moan. He wraps his hand around their dry cocks, pumping his fist over them. It’s harsh but good, and he whines with pure, undiluted *want* when Dagon thrusts up into his fist. He fights to clear his mind far enough to bring what he needs—needs now—into existence.

Dagon falls forward, kissing at his neck and chest while Tadiel continues to stroke them. There’s a noise of wood scraping on wood and a clatter next to them. Dagon ducks to the side and haphazardly digs something out of the drawer with a breathless “Here” as he shoves it into Tadiel’s hand.

Tadiel grabs the little bottle and pulls at the top for a moment before seeing the little lip that pops it open. A little spike of ice goes through his stomach as his brain catches up with his cock.

He wrenches further back from Dagon and holds the bottle up.

“This is half empty,” Tadiel points out.

“Yeah,” Dagon agrees, trying to close the distance between them. Tadiel leans away, not sure he believes what he’s thinking.

“I’ve been away from Earth for a hundred years,” he whispers.

Dagon laughs and casts his eyes down between their bodies, “And I’ve been following this rock band around for weeks, sitting in the room alone and thinking about you while everyone screws around me.” He kisses under Tadiel’s chin, and Tadiel feels a little flush of shame for the conclusion he nearly drew.

“I missed you during the sexual revolution, Tadiel.”

“I missed you so much,” Tadiel whispers. He sets his mouth to Dagon’s ear. “Open me? Let me remember how you feel?”

“Oh yes,” Dagon growls. He plucks the bottle from Tadiel’s hand and drips the clear, scentless liquid between them. Tadiel gulps at the chill, but keeps sliding his fist up and down their cocks. Dagon’s thighs shift underneath him, creating a space, and Dagon brings his hand underneath Tadiel's ass. Tadiel slows his stroke down to barely a crawl as Dagon’s finger slips inside him. Dagon pushes in slowly, and Tadiel lets him get to the second knuckle before he realizes he can’t do slow, not this time, not when he thought he’d never see Dagon again and here he is, naked underneath him.

He shifts back and lets his weight move down, pushing Dagon’s finger in all the way to the hilt. Dagon falls back from the kiss, glassy-eyed and slack-jawed.

“Okay, yeah,” he says. Tadiel rocks down on his finger, trying to sink it in that much deeper. He gasps a little when Dagon pushes in and he drops down at the same time. It’s a little too much after a century of not so much as touching himself or even being out of his robes, but all he wants right now is too much. He bears back against Dagon’s hand again, then leans forward. “Just give me two, Dagon. I can stand it, I promise.”

“Can’t hurt you,” Dagon whispers.

“Just do it,” Tadiel insists. He whimpers as Dagon’s hand leaves him. The feeling of emptiness seems so dire after only that small taste of pleasure. He watches, entranced despite how many times he has seen it before, as Dagon slicks up two fingers this time and slips his hand back

between Tadiel's thighs. Tadiel holds still as Dagon carefully circles two fingers around Tadiel's opening, then he sinks down onto them again when Dagon finally presses the tips inside him. The pressure burns as Tadiel works down and he doesn't even care. For too long there's been nothing but the bland pseudo-affectionate brushes of fingertips over shoulders from strangers who are supposed to be brothers-in-arms. This feels amazing, just because he can feel it. He's back on Earth, where things like Dagon's tongue darting out to wet his lips, and his lust-dark and wide-blown eyes staring at his fingers as they move into Tadiel's body, actually happen. Where muscles can burn as they extend much too fast. Where only a hundred years can pass and so much can change that a man has to relearn as simple an act as undressing his lover.

Dagon moans while Tadiel continues to thrust his body down onto scissoring fingers, gasping and muttering at the little flashes of pain and pleasure flaring through him.

Tadiel wonders, for a moment, what he must look like. Wanton. Head thrown back, legs spread wide, cock thrust forward, and thighs straining as he impatiently fucks himself on Dagon's hand.

Dagon's tongue darts out again, and Tadiel groans at the sight of it, the way Dagon is so focused on him. The burn starts to lessen. Dagon's free arm shoots out and wraps around his back, holding Tadiel up so he can move more easily. He's about to ask for a third when Dagon's fingers move inside him as he thrusts down, hitting hard in that spot that makes his entire body convulse.

"Oh, Dagon," he pants as the Demon's arms shake against his back. "Come on."

Dagon yanks his hand away, pulling out much too fast. Tadiel gulps and raises himself to his knees, grabbing Dagon's hand before he can pour more of the strange oil on his fingers.

"I'm ready, just take me."

"Tadiel." Dagon gulps and huffs out unevenly as he tries to catch his breath, "Tadiel, you're worrying me. What's the rush?"

"Not rushing. Need you," Tadiel insists. He tears the bottle out of Dagon's hand, dumps a generous amount into his palm, and runs it up Dagon's length. Dagon flicks his eyes up questioningly. Tadiel meets his

gaze, and Dagon moves down the pillows a little. Tadiel takes his lover's cock in hand, shifts up over it, setting it to his entrance on the third try and sinking down.

He's barely open enough to take it, but he knows that'll change once he has Dagon inside. Dagon nearly howls as Tadiel brings himself down and Tadiel snaps his head back to look at him.

Dagon is ruined and gasping, flushed almost red over his cheeks and down his chest. His mouth is hanging open. His ridiculously fluffed hair is flattening to his head as the sweat makes it heavy. Tadiel works Dagon's cock deeper into his resisting muscles as they slowly stretch enough to accommodate his lover's thick cock. Finally, he feels Dagon's groin against his ass and he settles himself down that little bit farther and wraps his fingers around Dagon's neck as he waits for the burn to soothe and Dagon's erratic breath to steady.

"It's so good, sweet," Dagon chokes out. "Missed you, missed you, too long."

"Yes," Tadiel agrees. He drags his fingers from the nape of Dagon's neck over his cheek, and brushes his thumb over Dagon's mustache, wiping it out of existence.

"There you are." He laughs, leaning into a hot kiss. His breath catches at the way the movement realigns Dagon's cock inside him, while Dagon works his tongue promisingly into Tadiel's mouth.

He wants too much at once, and it's overwhelming. He starts to pump back and forth, forward into the kiss, back onto Dagon's cock. Whether it's the lack of foreplay or the long absence, Dagon's never felt thicker or harder or hotter than this, and Tadiel can tell from the way the Demon's thighs are shaking and his eyes can't focus this isn't going to last very long, but they've got a room with a lock and the rest of the night ahead of them. Dagon can make love to him later.

He's getting used to the burn now. It feels good, and he pushes back harder. He jolts when Dagon's thighs hit his back, and moans when Dagon uses the leverage to thrust up into him, just at the edge of too hard, just at the edge of too fast.

Tadiel falls forward and clasps the edge of the headboard, using it to balance himself as he drops down and Dagon thrusts up.

“Oh yeah,” Dagon gasps. The only response Tadiel can get out is a moan. The burn is delicious, the constant friction, continuous pressure over the place inside him is staggering, almost too much. Too much for Dagon, anyway, if the high, soft whine is anything to go by. He loves that noise. It’s the one Dagon makes when he’s tipping over the edge and trying so hard not to go without him.

Tadiel drops his head down between his arms so he’s forehead-to-forehead with Dagon, each hot pant meeting in the air between them.

“It’s all right, go ahead,” Tadiel breathes. Dagon’s moan in response sharpens back up to the high-pitched whine at the end, and Tadiel fucks himself harder down onto Dagon.

“Come on, come on,” he whispers, angling his head into a messy kiss as he keeps thrusting back, driving Dagon to orgasm mercilessly. “I’ve got you, Dagon, come on, I’ve got you.”

Dagon manages to hold on for another handful of thrusts, his breath more ragged with each one, until he finally buries himself to the hilt with a howl. Tadiel keeps riding as his lover pumps himself dry inside of him. Dagon’s fingers bruise Tadiel’s thighs as he thrusts up in long, hard strokes, sputtering nonsense with his eyes closed, head craned back. Tadiel’s thighs are aching more with every move he makes, but he keeps moving, seeking out bliss while he watches Dagon’s face settle, lip draw into his mouth, eyes uncrease. His own orgasm hits without warning and keeps going on for longer than it ever has before, each jump of his cock making him shout again.

He crumples into Dagon with a final cry, barely aware of Dagon kissing his face as he comes down.

“Tadiel?” Dagon asks breathlessly, nudging his hands at Tadiel’s ass and pushing up. Tadiel pulls off, gulping a little at the wet sound of Dagon falling out of him. Dagon slumps back against the pillows, pulling Tadiel down with him. Tadiel tucks his body against Dagon’s, settling his head onto Dagon’s chest as they move down onto the bed together.

“That was amazing,” Dagon pants, wrapping his arm around Tadiel. “We’ve got to do that again.” Tadiel shivers under the soft brush of Dagon's fingers and throws his arm over Dagon’s chest. Dagon drops his hand onto

Tadiel's head, massaging little circles into his scalp. It's nice. He has missed simple touches like this most.

"So, what is wrong, sweet? You're so upset. Where have you been all this time?"

"Heaven," Tadiel replies. "We were losing so many Angels to Earth in the beginning of this century that Heaven withdrew. All the loyal were ordered to return, and then we were held."

Dagon's arm tightens around him. "Were you imprisoned in Heaven this whole time?"

"Not in so many words."

"What happened there?"

"We trained. We swore our allegiances. And… we prepared."

"Prepared for what?"

Tadiel nearly rolls his eyes. Dagon does spend too much time on Earth.

"What else? The Apocalypse, Dagon. Heaven plans to move forward soon."

The movement of Dagon's fingers against his scalp stops. "How soon?"

"I don't know. Less than a century, I'm certain, but how much less… who knows?"

"How did you get back?"

"I have been reassigned. The few Angels who returned have all been reassigned."

"Reassigned to what?"

"To hunt the Runaway Angels."

"The Angels on Earth now hunt their brothers rather than gather souls?" Dagon whispers.

"Heaven is full," Tadiel affirmed.

"And how will you hunt Runaways? They're only human. You can only find a specific human if they're due to die or bringing attention to themselves as Michael was. So what would be the point?"

"That is a question Raphael failed to ask when I suggested it to him."

Dagon tenses underneath him. “You? You suggested Heaven hunt down Angels who couldn’t wholly align themselves with Heaven?” The accusation in his voice makes Tadiel’s chest seize for a moment.

“I suggested sending a few Angels, familiar enough with Earth to stay until the Apocalypse, to go on wild goose chases for Angels who can only be found a moment before they become human and when they are lost among the daily crowds of the dying. The Apocalypse is nearly here. Should we find no one in a hundred years, it won’t be so unusual. We are hunting through a haystack for needles that have turned into hay. Raphael is zealous and vengeful and heard what he wanted to hear.”

“Oh.” Dagon’s fingers move in his hair again.

“He also failed to realize that in a century all the runaways will be dead anyway. Raphael is a blunt instrument. Nothing more.”

“How did you get them to agree to this? Last I saw you, they were suspicious of your loyalties.”

“I have learned persuasion,” Tadiel answers. He doesn’t mention the brown-nosing and the falsely heartfelt speeches and every dirty trick of flattery and manipulation he used to get back. He’ll tell Dagon eventually. It needn’t be this moment.

He presses his lips to Dagon’s chest. “I thought I’d never see you again,” he sighs.

Dagon kisses his still sweaty forehead and grabs the blankets, whipping them from the side of the bed so the two of them are sandwiched between the covers. Tadiel shifts up his body so he can kiss him again.

He rolls away instantly when he hears the door burst open. The folded blanket impedes his panicked escape, which is probably for the best. Naked in bed with a man isn’t much worse than naked and covered in sweat and come in a man’s room. Dagon’s hand lands square on his chest, as though to pin him down.

“Sweet,” he says, “it’s fine. Shhh.”

Tadiel’s panic doesn’t really lessen, but it quiets enough to take in the group of three young women, girls really. Their clothes are strange mishmashes of bright colors and beads and fringes and feathers and scarves. They’re giggling and holding onto one another’s wrists and waists. They

giggle harder when they see Tadiel and Dagon, clearly post-coital, and Dagon's hand pushes down harder on his throbbing heart.

"Ladies," Dagon sighs, as though nothing more than mildly irritated. "You have got to knock. I mean, for real."

The girl who already seems like the leader, busty, with her long, full red hair covering more of her body than her clothes do, steps forward and laughs. "I figured you were just in here reading again. I didn't expect to ever see you get laid."

She winks at Tadiel, and he flinches.

"Leave him alone. He just got in from out of town. He's not used to you far-out chicks and your crazy shit."

The redhead grins and flicks a finger at Tadiel. "Oh my God, is this the guy?"

"Yeah, this is the guy," Dagon tells her. His hand moves from Tadiel's chest to the back of his head. Tadiel doesn't move.

"Oh, don't look at us like that, sweetheart." The redhead's laugh is full-throated and reassuring. "We're cool." She flicks her smoked glasses up so they no longer cover her eyes. "They call me Alliance. This is Zephyr and Shepard. What's your name?"

"Tadiel," he replies dumbly. He usually pretends to have a more human name when he interacts with humans, but he has no idea what a normal human name might be in this brave new world.

"Wait, really?" Alliance asks.

"Don't make fun of his name. I'm still going to find out what your real name is one of these days," Dagon says to the girl. Tadiel relaxes back into the mattress. Something odd is going on, but it's not a threat.

"I'd shake your hand… but, uh." She waves a hand at the two of them and the girls behind her giggle. "And speaking of getting your hands on something—Dagon, Mick and the boys sent us down to see if you had anything?"

Tadiel flicks his eyes back to Dagon, who nods and ruffles his hair. "Yeah, yeah, sure thing. Can you grab my bag for me?"

The girl named Alliance—and lying and disgraced as he is, Tadiel is still Angel enough to know her given name is Mary-Anne, Zephyr is really

Donna, and Shepard is Bonnie—goes over to a pile of bags Tadiel hadn't noticed and grabs a leather satchel off the top. She tosses it to him. Dagon catches it and sits up, the blanket falling off his bare chest. Tadiel catches the way Shepard/Bonnie stares at his lover's bare skin. It makes him uncomfortable and a little angry, the same way he felt when he noticed Dagon's oil was half gone.

Dagon digs through the satchel, and Tadiel feels the slight itch of Demon magic as he multiplies something inside of it. He pulls out a shiny, clear bag full of something clumped and green and hands it to the girl. She closes her fist and points her thumb upward at him.

"If you guys are… done, you're welcome to join us. Jam session. The boys were doing covers before they sent us out."

Dagon sets his arm on Tadiel's bare shoulder. "We're not done. You ladies enjoy, stick that stuff in your purse or something, and Zephyr, darling, lock the door behind you?"

"We got it. See you at breakfast?"

"Maybe." Dagon winks at the girls. They all giggle in unison again and leave. The girl Zephyr grins at them and spins the lock before she ducks out and closes the door.

"What just—" Tadiel started.

"It's… complicated. I'm basically following around a rock band. They're like troubadours. More people come to see them, but it's still about women and sex. Those girls follow the band around and sleep with them. I follow the band around and give everyone drugs. It horrifies enough people to count as a sin, but I only give them harmless stuff. You might like it, actually. We could try it sometime, if you want."

Tadiel's eyes are still trained on the door.

"They… didn't care. They were nice to us. They didn't… act like humans usually do about two men."

Dagon leans down to kiss him and settles down next to him so they are face-to-face. "You're going to love the 70s. They're a select group, a lot of people still care, but you can't get stoned or thrown in Reading Gaol like you used to."

"Really?"

"Tadiel?" Dagon starts, wrapping his fingers back into Tadiel's hair.

“Mm?” Tadiel prompts after several moments of silence.

“How much… supervision do you have from Heaven?”

Tadiel shrugs. “Not much. I’ll need to seem like I’m trying. I can’t do much magic around a Demon. I was planning to flit around the world during the day. If I ever feel an Angel reject their wings, I’ll have to go there. But Raphael is training the Armies of Heaven and God… has not been watching me thus far. Any of us, really.”

Tadiel settles back onto Dagon’s chest, letting his head rise and fall with the motion of Dagon’s breathing. He’s considering falling asleep tonight. He hasn’t slept in a century, and he misses that too. He has no intention of leaving Dagon’s arms, and they can’t have sex for the *entire* night. Sleep is a reasonable second choice.

“Tadiel… if you want to, you could… we could….” Dagon cuts off, the way he does whenever he’s saying something he thinks Tadiel won’t like.

“We could what?”

“The world has changed a lot in the twentieth century. There are… places we could be together. Even in America. I could take you to the movies in Chicago.”

“What’s movies?” Tadiel asks.

“They’re plays, but they’re recorded in a bunch of little pictures, like those crank things they used to have, with the butler? But so much better. I’ll take you to one.”

“I’d like that,” Tadiel says.

“I could… kiss you in the street in San Francisco.”

“Yes?”

“We could… we’re not in the danger we once were. If Heaven is withdrawn and the world is changed… we could… stay together. “

“Here?”

“Well, yes.” Dagon’s kissing his forehead. “We’ll find something for you to do in the band’s entourage for a little while, but you’re going to hate rock and roll. But… I meant… if you’re hunting Runaways until Armageddon, you have to be on Earth to catch them the moment they cut off their wings, right?”

“Right.”

“So… you’re on Earth till the world ends?”

Tadiel is warm and content, post-orgasm, and post-someone blatantly accepting his relationship with the most important person who has ever been in the world for him. He’s a little overwhelmed but mostly tired and happy. “Yes,” he yawns.

“What if we were on Earth together,” Dagon whispers. “Tadiel? What if… what if I gathered souls for Hell, and you pretended to hunt Runaways for Heaven… and we were… here on Earth together?”

Tadiel’s head quirks up.

“All the time?”

“I’ve thought about it,” Dagon says. “If we had… an apartment together, like Michael and Simone. Or stayed in hotels all the time. If I could… find you, in the same place or anywhere in the world. Every night.”

Tadiel swallows. “Yes, I’ve thought about it.”

“We could. Now,” Dagon says.

“Yes. I… yes, Dagon.”

Dagon grins the type of grin that could blind all of Heaven, then ducks down to kiss him. “Okay, let’s do that.”

Tadiel traces his fingers over Dagon’s hand, resting on his chest.

“Let’s start tonight.”

“After we… afterward… afterward, will you make love to me again?”

“Anything for you.”

Tadiel moans in response and digs his fingertips into the indents above the swell of Dagon’s ass, using palmfuls of firm flesh to pull Dagon’s body tighter to his own, rutting up as he wraps his wings harder around him. The way Dagon’s wings rub back and forth across his own makes his feathers itch slightly as they’re pushed against the grain. His desire to feel Dagon’s cock sinking into his body is aching between his legs, but he can’t bring himself to let go of his lover quite yet. Can’t let Dagon pull up out of the messy kiss that Tadiel feels like he’s drowning under, overcome with hot breath and warm lips.

He has to take it all in. He can’t let a single brush of lips or fingertips be taken for granted this time. They are all, for the first and only time, the

last ones. He can't count on seeing Dagon again later in the day, like he's gotten so used to since his return from Heaven back in the seventies. He can't be certain he'll stumble on Dagon in a decade or a century or a millennium from now, like they've gotten used to over the course of an eternity. There's no eternity left.

And knowing that makes letting go of him impossible. Dagon must feel the same; he's burrowing down into Tadiel's body. They're pressed so tight their hips can barely move against each other. Their full, heavy cocks are trapped together, rubbing with even less movement back and forth than their wings.

Dagon's kiss slips down from Tadiel's mouth, over his chin, across to his ear.

"Love you," he pants. "Love you, love you, love you."

Tadiel presses up harder at the choked-off words, trying to get some friction to alleviate what feels like buzzing under his skin.

"Want to come like this?" Dagon pants, shuddering down hard against Tadiel's groin.

"No," Tadiel protests, forcing himself to loosen his arms and wings a fraction, then, with a gulp, a fraction further. "No, no. Inside."

Dagon lays another kiss against Tadiel's mouth, tongue delving between Tadiel's parted lips. His hand comes up to cup Tadiel's face. Tadiel nuzzles into it, missing the warmth instantly when Dagon's hand creeps up under their pillows where they left the lube this morning. Tadiel feels the cool plastic tube dragging down the side of his body as Dagon moves his hands down the mattress, planting them on either side of Tadiel's hips and pulling away with a groan. He already looks wrecked. Lips red and kiss-bruised. Sweat on his chest glistens in the orange of the streetlight, which also halos his blond hair where it sticks up from Tadiel pulling at it while they ground their bodies together.

"Here," Dagon breathes, brushing his fingertips over the top of Tadiel's wing, pressing it in toward his body gently.

Tadiel grabs Dagon's arms, using them to lever himself up. He tucks the wing behind his back and leans forward to kiss Dagon as he pops the lube bottle open between them. The Demon splays his hand open over Tadiel's stomach and eases him back down onto the mattress, tucking his

body against Tadiel's. He ruts against Tadiel's hip almost absentmindedly as he tips lube over his palm and slicks Tadiel's cock.

He hisses at the sudden cold against the begging flesh, but Dagon strokes out his apology. Tadiel lets his head fall back and his hips rock up. The buzzing under his skin thrums almost angrily. He tries to follow Dagon's hand up as he withdraws it, a little moan of protest at the last touch escaping him. The thrum of want is sparked even higher by the slide of Dagon's fingers down his perineum. They drag heavily against the sensitive skin before diving between his cheeks.

Tadiel kicks his legs out and he gasps. There is a little bit of pain underneath the slow bloom of pleasure as Dagon traces his lubed fingers over Tadiel's opening.

"Sure, sweet?" Dagon whispers. "We can—"

"No." Tadiel shakes his head. "Like this, please."

"Again?"

"Yes."

Dagon bites his lip but continues pulling his fingers back and forth across the somewhat swollen skin. Tadiel lets his eyes drift closed. He actually likes the edge of soreness that Dagon's touch brings to the surface. It glows at the edge of the warm, good feeling, making it better, as though drawing energy from the ghosts of sensation from the other three times Dagon has stretched and filled him since last night.

Dagon presses his index finger inward. Tadiel shivers at the feeling of his skin lapping over the intrusion. His lover works his finger in and out in uncertain, shallow movements that don't do much more than tickle at the overstimulated skin before his hand is gone again. Tadiel inches his legs farther apart, ready for it when Dagon comes back, sinking two generously lubed fingers into Tadiel's entrance. The promise of fullness doesn't quite cover the burn of the raw skin and Tadiel drops his face to Dagon's shoulder, mewling as Dagon twists his fingers, spreading the lube and stretching Tadiel out carefully.

Tadiel whines and his wings spasm when Dagon's knuckles rub against the oversensitive skin of his rim.

"Too much?" Dagon asks breathlessly.

"Not fragile, Dagon," Tadiel huffs. "Don't stop."

He works back insistently into the touch, bringing Dagon's knuckles inside and letting the extra width pull the sore skin wider. Heat builds in his stomach, coiling and uncoiling with each press of Dagon's fingers inside his body and drag of fingers back out. He wriggles closer to Dagon, breathing through the sting that lies right beneath the hot ache, dismissing his body's protest that he's had quite enough sex in the last few days for the lunacy it obviously is.

He loves this, feeling his body open under Dagon's hand. The way his lover always lays him out so carefully, still asks him if it's too much when he knows Tadiel loves it when it's too much, loves the reminder of excess. The reminder that he now *uses* the body he spent so much time simply inhabiting.

Dagon's fingers are sunk in all the way to the knuckle now and Tadiel works his hips, trying to ride Dagon's hand and get the friction he's dying for. "Enough, Dagon," he gasps. "Please, I'm ready, jus—"

"Shh." Dagon kisses his temple again, and Tadiel feels his fingers slowly scissoring apart inside him. "Let me take you slow this time."

Tadiel groans at the husky request, buries his face further into Dagon's shoulder, and lifts his knees. He digs his heels into the mattress and lets his thighs fall open. Dagon pushes in again, one hard thrust because he knows it revs Tadiel up, then draws back slowly, spreading his fingers wider and wider as he pulls back in the way that drives Tadiel nuts. He lets loose a moan, which Dagon answers with another hard thrust into Tadiel's hole. The slow, coiling heat in his stomach is writhing like a nest of snakes now. Electricity bolts up his spine with every little bit Dagon stretches him.

"Dagon!" he grinds out, voice nearly lost in a fresh crash of thunder and a wail of sirens.

"Okay, sweet, okay," Dagon mutters. Tadiel's entire body spasms as Dagon's fingers slip out of his ass and the buzzing under his skin screams at the loss. Dagon's quick to return with three fingers, sinking them in with one slow movement that makes Tadiel thrash and dig his fingers into his own knees. He ruts down, trying to ride Dagon's hand. The soreness is getting worked out, the edge of pain is fading, being replaced by an aching, throbbing sensation that makes every press of Dagon's fingers feel deeper, every stretch feel wider.

“Oh, I could come from this,” Tadiel moans into Dagon’s shoulder as Dagon’s knuckles brush his ass again.

“We can’t have that.” Dagon chuckles softly. Tadiel’s hands fly up to his pillow, wringing it. He clenches his eyes shut as Dagon pumps inside him again, then draws carefully back out. He feels Dagon shift on the bed, and shivers as the fine hair on Dagon’s legs tickles at his inner thighs. Dagon traces his fingertips up Tadiel’s shins, over his knees, then palms his way up the insides of Tadiel’s thighs, finally digging his thumbs into the grooves between Tadiel’s groin and his hipbones, ringing his fingers around the base of Tadiel’s cock and squeezing. Tadiel moans at the way it gives him some relief from his mounting desire. Dagon pats his haunch affectionately before letting go.

Tadiel looks up at him, flushing in anticipation at the concentration on Dagon’s face as he drizzles more lube into his hand. He grabs Dagon’s elbows and hauls himself up into a kiss, flicking his wings back out so they don’t get pinned underneath him while Dagon is fucking him, then falls languidly back out of the kiss and onto the mattress. He wraps his legs around Dagon’s waist as the Demon slicks his own cock, then glides his fist quickly up and down Tadiel’s. He arches at the slide, urging Dagon forward.

“Shhh,” Dagon says, leaning back against Tadiel’s calves in protest and pouring a little more lube over his fingers. He slides them through Tadiel’s cheeks.

It’s wetter than Tadiel prefers to be and Dagon knows that, but they’ve been falling in and out of bed since the first omens and Tadiel is *raw*.

“Dagon,” Tadiel argues when Dagon brings his fingers back to the bottle. “Just do it,” he insists, jabbing his heels into Dagon’s back.

Dagon huffs but closes the bottle and tosses it back up the headboard. Tadiel catches Dagon's forearms in his hands and tries to pull him forward.

“Wait—”

“Dago—”

“I want to see you,” Dagon pants.

“You can see in the dark,” Tadiel protests. “Just fuck me.”

“No, I want to… in the lights,” Dagon manages, trying to push back as Tadiel tries to urge him forward.

Tadiel growls but bites his lip and fights to clear his mind enough to manifest a hodgepodge of lit candles on their nightstand, across Dagon's desk, and a few in saucers on the edges of their bookshelves.

Dagon brushes his magically clean hand over Tadiel's face. "I've missed you in the candlelight."

And with that, he finally moves forward, settling his body over Tadiel's and dropping his soft, lush lips into a kiss before moving back to align their bodies.

Tadiel fixes his eyes on his lover's face, the way he bites his lip as he settles the head of his cock to Tadiel's threshold, the way his long light eyelashes flutter against his cheeks as he presses in. Tadiel tries to hold still at the first advance. It feels good, just enough to stretch his rim, not quite enough to thrust back onto. Dagon draws back, then inches in a little farther before rocking back out, then in a little farther than the last time. Tadiel's wings tremble at the slow movement and the way it fans the fire in his body but doesn't feed it.

Usually when Dagon goes slow he's teasing, and, depending on his mood, Tadiel will either smack his thigh and tell him to cut it out, or he'll lie back and play along. But this isn't teasing. Dagon doesn't have his insouciant grin or tickling fingers or singsong voice. As desperate as Tadiel is to feel Dagon fill him, to feel fully entwined and complete, it's hard to break out of this moment. There is something reverent about the way Dagon's working into him. Something worshipful in his eyes. His hands move over Tadiel's skin like fingers over prayer beads.

Tadiel blows out a breath, hitches his legs up a little higher on Dagon's hips, inviting him deeper but not forcing. Dagon presses forward.

The blunt, smooth slide of Dagon's cock inside him is still a little painful, like pushing a finger into a fading bruise, but the sensation of being slowly filled, slowly connected, and the cautious slide of Dagon's wet velvet cock against his raw skin is soothing his desperation, making flames of frustration settle into embers of passion, hotter but calmer.

Tadiel arcs off the bed with a groan of pure pleasure when Dagon finally bottoms out and grinds in deep. He lies down against Tadiel's body, pulling his knees back far enough for their mouths to meet, tongues to tangle. Dagon rocks into him, speed not increasing, but depth making up for it. Tadiel brings his arms and wings up off the bed, wrapping his hands

around Dagon's neck and wings around his back, leaving himself open under Dagon's tongue and cock as the desire stokes higher in his body. He doesn't notice the way Dagon is pulling his knees a little farther apart, a little closer to the mattress, until he feels the heat start to spiral with the steady, insistent, but unpunctuated constant brush of Dagon's cock against his prostate. The movement makes his breath go wild and his cock jump, and he burns hotter and hotter as Dagon pushes him open and fucks into him. Every stroke sends shocks up his spine and shivers through his legs, pressed nearly down into the mattress, holding him out wide enough that they don't have to break the kiss.

"Getting close, sweet?" Dagon pants.

"Almost, almost."

Dagon presses his legs even farther back with a strangled huff of breath and strokes slowly. The heat in his body changes instantly from cresting waves to roiling boil.

"Uh," he pants.

"Come on, Tadiel," Dagon answers. "Come on, I've got you."

Tadiel tries to concentrate on the feeling in his body. Dagon's sweat-slicked chest against his thighs, hot, moist breath on his face, the biceps under his hands.

He can't quite come. He's not sure if it's the spike of soreness cutting at the edge of his orgasm, or if he just doesn't want this to end yet, knowing what's coming after. Dagon whines, the high, not-quite-hidden noise he makes when he could pop at any moment but is determined to hold out because he wants to get Tadiel there first. Tadiel cranes his head up, further into Dagon's stuttering kiss.

"I love you," Tadiel gasps.

"You too," Dagon manages roughly.

The heat spikes higher in his body. He's getting closer. Dagon gasps and shudders and brings a hand between them. Tadiel arches back as Dagon pumps over his cock in harsh, quick movements.

"Uh, uh," Tadiel lets out. Dagon shudders down into him.

And suddenly the heat is gone. Tadiel feels his entire body blasted through by something completely different. Not quite cold, not quite

electric, it's like what light must feel like—it's sharp and bright and sudden and the extra sensation on top of the slow build pushes him over.

He jerks up into Dagon's kiss with a broken cry and comes hard, feeling it land up his stomach in warm, sticky ropes. On top of him, Dagon buries himself as deep as he can get. Tadiel feels Dagon spill inside him, still pushing forward like he can't get close enough.

They ride it out together until Tadiel's drumming heart finally slows and Dagon's body finally loosens. He lowers his legs and Dagon drops down against him, cock still inside Tadiel's body. When he opens his eyes, he realizes the candles have blown out.

"Dagon?" he whispers, combing his fingers through Dagon's sweat-soaked hair.

"I know. I felt it come through you. The call. We should hurry. It must be starting."

"Yes," Tadiel agrees simply. He wishes he wasn't afraid. It's silly. Whatever is about to happen can't be worse than going to war against Dagon and being responsible for the destruction of Earth. Dagon presses a kiss to his chest, then another to his mouth. Tadiel clutches the back of Dagon's head and forces the kiss, sloppy and needy, as another roar of sirens passes by. There are other sounds drifting up now too, between thunder bursts. Yelling in the streets. Glass breaking.

"Just like our first time, huh?" Dagon says. His voice lilts like he's joking, but there is no mirth there. Tadiel fights the urge to drag him down into another kiss.

It has to be done.

Dagon moves off him and pulls open the nightstand drawer. He sits up and pulls out two long, sharp knives. Tadiel moves up to his knees, wincing. Dagon hands him one of the knives with a shaking hand. Tadiel grabs his wrist and squeezes. Dagon gives him a shaky smile as he moves closer, until their still sticky stomachs touch.

Tadiel shivers as he feels the cold blade of Dagon's knife settle against his wing joint. He sets his own blade to Dagon's wing.

Now they're cheek to cheek, arms around each other, knives ready. Tadiel forces out a breath that quivers in the air as it really hits him:

This is their last night on Earth.

Dagon kisses his ear and whispers, “Three… two… one.”

He brings his blade down hard. The slice is clean and fast. The pain of Dagon’s echoing motion screams along in the wake of the razor-sharp blade, and Tadiel feels a wave of nausea crash against him at the sickening thud of his wing falling onto his feet behind him. He watches for a stunned second as Dagon’s wing, crumpled down against the mattress, starts to flicker with red flames that don’t touch the sheets.

“Come on, do it,” Dagon growls in his ear, “Before they find us. Come on, Tadiel.”

Tadiel sets the blade to Dagon’s other wing joint, his forearm scraping against the long, raised scab where the wing had been. He whimpers at the feeling and begins cutting down Dagon’s other wing as Dagon mutters soothing nonsense to him, punctuated by cut-off breaths.

Tadiel already feels weaker. The blade is harder to work. He shrieks when Dagon’s blade catches at a tendon and he pushes down harder.

Another sear of pain, another thud, more nausea, and Dagon’s arms tighten around him.

He’s crying and can tell from the wetness on his shoulder that Dagon is crying too.

Tadiel runs his hand soothingly over Dagon’s back, stops with his fingertips against the scabs, and they watch each other’s wings burn, the red of Dagon’s and the blue of Tadiel’s reflecting against the blackout black of the window. The streetlights have gone out.

Tadiel’s body aches now. He feels sore and wrung out and exhausted. And somehow, hopeful. Victorious. After a million demanded wins for Heaven and Hell, they have their own. It’s a sad, small victory, but it’s still theirs.

He tucks his head against Dagon’s as the last of his wings disappear with a final fading lick of flame. He looks back toward the window and sees there are still flames against the black.

“Dagon. Look.”

He feels Dagon’s head turn and the way his chest rises and falls as he gasps.

“It’s here.”

Fire is raining down from Heaven. The Apocalypse is starting. Tadiel clings to Dagon, who brings them both back to the mattress, arms still around each other. Tadiel kisses him until the scent of smoke starts to creep into the room. Dagon settles back out of the kiss, dark-brown eyes wet as they lock onto Tadiel's. Tadiel brushes a lock of Dagon's blond hair away from his face.

"Are you afraid?" Dagon whispers.

"A little," Tadiel replies. "Less afraid of dying in the smoke than burning, though."

"Right." Dagon nods. He reaches down and pointlessly pulls the blankets up over their naked bodies.

"I wish we knew where we'll go when we die." Tadiel sighs. Up in the corner of the bedroom, smoke is starting to curl, eddying between the walls and the ceiling.

"I know where I'm going," Dagon says.

"Where are you going?" Tadiel coughs and Dagon presses closer, skin still warm and sweaty. He kisses him softly.

"With you."

LILITH DUVALIER is approaching thirty faster than anticipated and still has no idea what she wants to do when she grows up. She should probably be working on that, but it's really hard. She loves pumpkin flavored things, the Apocalypse, and being left alone with a book (and a beer).

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